

Fairy Fiction:
Fairy Tale Aspects in a Selection of Oscar Wilde's Works

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Table of Contents

Chapter 1 – Introduction.....3

Chapter 2 – The Fairy Tales.....11

Chapter 3 – *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.....36

Chapter 4 – The Plays.....57

Chapter 5 – Conclusion.....78

Works Cited.....84

1 – Introduction

*All art is at once surface and symbol.
Those who go beneath the surface do so at their peril.
Those who read the symbol do so at their peril.*

(Preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, DG 6)

Oscar Wilde wrote himself into history as a sharp and pungent writer and a striking personality with a suitable epigram at hand for every occasion. He is, though, perhaps most well-known for his illicit relationship with Lord Alfred Douglas, which resulted in Wilde being sentenced to two years of hard labour for homosexual offences. However, Wilde left to the world not only the fascinating story of his own life, but also a number of literary works in a variety of genres, both fictional and non-fictional. In several of these works the same themes, ideas, linguistic style, and even names and verbatim phrases recur. Some of the works are more generally recognised and appreciated than others, most notably his society comedies and to some extent the novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891). There is, however, much more to the body of Wilde's work than a selection of amusing plays and a controversial novel. Ranging from essays on various aspects of society and art to sombre poems and delightful, but also disturbing, fairy tales, there is something to be found for everyone.

My focus throughout this thesis will be on a selection of Wilde's fictional works as literary products in their own right, isolated from Wilde's life and experiences. There is, though, no denying that Oscar Wilde did lead a life that coincided with his works in many ways. For example, he strongly satirised the conventions and superficial morality of upper class society in Victorian Britain. As it turned out later, the breaking of these very conventions is what led to Wilde's downfall. It is interesting to note that several of the coincidental events occurred in

Wilde's life some time after he had considered them in his writing. This confirms Wilde's statement in "The Decay of Lying" that "Life imitates art far more than Art imitates Life" (CW 982). Perhaps Wilde had noted this tendency and had himself in mind when he in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* wrote about a novel that strongly influenced Dorian that it "seemed to him to contain the story of his own life, written before he had lived it" (DG 147). What is peculiar in Wilde's case is that it was he himself who wrote his own life before he had lived it. There is no question that Wilde's writing is strongly influenced by the life he led and the time and society in which he lived. His works are often analysed as portrayals of biographical events and social criticism, a notion that is by no means wrong, but that should not be exclusive. My claim is not that Wilde's works either should or should not be read as isolated from their author, but that they *can be*.

Not least have Wilde's works often been subjected to analyses based on his sexuality. My focus will, however, be on other "fairy" aspects, namely aspects of the fairy tale genre. I have chosen to study Wilde's works from this angle partly to try to show that they can indeed be read without considering their author's person, and partly to see what, if anything, can be gained from studying and comparing works belonging to different genres with one set basis for interpretation in mind. In addition, I wish to draw attention to those of Wilde's stories that are labelled *fairy tales* because I consider them fascinating pieces of art that are too often overshadowed by his other works. My main concern is thus a twofold one: Are Wilde's fairy tales really fairy tales as such, and to what extent do his other works contain fairy tale elements?

Oscar Wilde's fairy tales tend to be underestimated, and are not generally considered among his major works. W.B. Yeats is said to have described these tales as "over decorated and seldom amusing" (Miller 114). When writing the introduction to an edition of *The Happy Prince and Other Fairy Tales* in 1923, Yeats also pointed out that "[t]he further Wilde goes in his

writings from the method of speech, from improvisation, from sympathy with some especial audience, the less original he is, the less accomplished” (McCormack 102). Wilde’s fairy tales, like all fairy tales, are based on an oral tradition of storytelling. His style of writing in these stories is, however, elaborate and includes ornate descriptions of details. Thus, it seems evident that Yeats was not overly impressed with Wilde’s attempts at the genre. In general, as Robert Keith Miller points out, “No area of Wilde’s work has been more consistently slighted than his fairy tales, in part, I suspect, because they offer inconvenient evidence that Wilde is more complex than he looks at first glance” (90). By claiming Wilde to be complex, Miller suggests that there is more to Wilde’s art than “those aspects of his work that reflect the wit and decadence with which one usually associates his name” (90). Not only in terms of complexity, but also in terms of literary quality, I find that Wilde’s fairy tales deserve more of a place in the foreground. They deserve to be noted both because the tales are in themselves literature worth reading and studying, and because they highlight aspects of the fairy tale genre that recur in several of Wilde’s other works as well, regardless of what genre the respective works are normally considered to belong to.

Following this introductory chapter, Chapter Two will deal with Wilde’s fairy tales. The tales I have chosen to include are “The Happy Prince”, “The Nightingale and the Rose”, and “The Selfish Giant” from Wilde’s first collection of fairy tales, *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* (1888), and “The Star-Child” from his second collection, *A House of Pomegranates* (1891). My reason for choosing three tales from the first collection and only one from the second is that the discussion of these tales is to be a basis for discussion of other works in the subsequent chapters. It is thus most advantageous to study the tales that most clearly illustrate fairy tale elements. This is not to say that the other tales in the collections are any less worthy of the fairy tale label, but that for reasons of restrictions of this thesis’ extent, I have to limit the number of

tales to study. The ones I have chosen exemplify more, or more clearly, various aspects of the fairy tale genre than some of the other tales do. Thus they will provide a broader basis for comparison when I later turn to Wilde's novel and plays.

The Picture of Dorian Gray is Oscar Wilde's only novel. In Chapter Three, I will discuss whether this book is in fact a novel, or if perhaps it is better described as an extended fairy tale. Chapter Four deals with two of Wilde's plays: *Salomé* (1893) and *An Ideal Husband* (1895). Chapter Five presents the conclusion of this thesis. In it, I will compare and contrast what I have found in the four previous chapters and the signification of my results. Following this, I will briefly look at genre limitations and the possible advantages of disregarding these.

The question of genre is indeed a problematic one when it comes to Oscar Wilde's works. In addition to the possibility of being reminiscent of a fairy tale, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* can give its readers the sensation of reading a play because the novel's structure is one of much dialogue supplemented with relatively long scenic descriptions. To a large extent the question of genre boils down to the question of what is understood by the term and how strictly one chooses to set the boundaries for its various hyponyms. In *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, the term *genre* is defined as "used in literary criticism to signify a literary species" (Abrams 67). This seems clear enough, but what about the definitions of some of these species? Novels, for example, are defined as:

extended works of prose fiction. . . . its magnitude permits a greater variety of characters, greater complication of plot (or plots), an ampler development of milieu, and a more sustained and subtle exploration of character than do the shorter, hence necessarily more concentrated, modes. (Abrams 110)

If we turn to Oscar Wilde's novel, it is not extensive in size, number of characters, or development of milieu. In addition, its plot is relatively confined and straightforward.

Straightforward, that is, in the sense of not containing a multitude of sub-plots and complicating

factors, and not in the sense of being commonplace and easily comprehended.

Then again there is the question whether novels as such can be described as one genre, or if the term is too wide. Perhaps the genre distinction should rather be between types of novels, such as detective stories, picaresque novels, gothic novels, and so on. If that be the case, Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* would in many ways best be described as a gothic novel. This type of novel emerged in the eighteenth century and "concentrated on the fantastic, the macabre and the supernatural, with haunted castles, spectres from the grave and wild landscapes" (Carter and McRae 189). Although *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was written a century after the heyday of gothic literature, the novel makes use of several of the style's most recognisable features. In fact, the first thoroughly gothic novel, Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), has been described in words that just as easily can be applied to Wilde's novel: "Passion, grief and terror are the mainstays of the plot, which moves between the unlikely and the totally incredible" (Carter and McRae 189). Wilde's novel does, however, also portray settings that were perfectly commonplace in Victorian Britain, such as various social events in upper class society. What seems disconcerting when reading *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is not the mere presence of "totally incredible" gothic elements, but how unproblematic it is to accept and believe these elements.

The supernatural aspect of gothic novels is a part of what links the genre to that of fairy tales. I will explore this link further in the discussion of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* as an extended fairy tale. For now, let me just clarify that as a general basis for my reasoning, I will normally use the term genre, and the terms for the various types of genres, broadly and traditionally. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* will be dealt with as a novel with fairy tale and gothic elements and not as a gothic novel as such.

Seeing as my focus is on fairy tale elements, this genre will be looked at in more detail in

order to provide a basis for further discussion. I will use the Russian Formalist Vladimir Propp's study of the morphology of folktales to deduce what are essential fairy tale elements in a story. In the introduction to Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale*, Alan Dundes states that "[t]he English title *Morphology of the Folktale* is misleading. Propp limits his analysis to only one kind of folktale, that is to fairy tales. . . ." (xiv). Although there are differences between traditional folk fairy tales and artistically written fairy tales, there are enough similarities of structure as well as content to treat the two varieties as one genre, which is what I have chosen to do in this thesis.

According to *Litteraturvitenskapelig leksikon*, Propp's study is somewhat of a pioneering work within the field of narrative theory in general, and has influenced among others Claude Lévi-Strauss and his structuralistic anthropology (Lothe, et al. 170). In his study, Propp came up with thirty-one fairy tale functions, which are to some extent universal. These functions will be presented more thoroughly in Chapter Two. Peter Gilet points out that "Propp is . . . typically Formalist in his morphological priorities, and in his concern for the text rather than the context" (28). My theoretical basis for this thesis will, however, not be Formalism, but close to New Criticism. New Criticism also focuses on the texts as isolated from context, which is an essential notion of my approach to Wilde's works. I am, as mentioned previously, in general less rigid in this respect than the New Critics: I do not imply that all literary texts *shall* be read in isolation from their authors, but that most texts, in my example Wilde's texts, *can* be read as literature in their own autonomic right. This is in accordance with Wilde's idea of art for art's sake. Julia Prewitt Brown points out in her *Oscar Wilde's Philosophy of Art* that "Wilde's aestheticism teaches that, although situated in its particular time and place, the work of art nonetheless possesses an inherently irreducible quality" (75).

The main features of New Criticism are, according to *Litteraturvitenskapelig leksikon*, the assertion that any literary text is an isolated and autonomous object for analysis; a focus on close

reading of the literary texts; an emphasis on use of language, figures of speech and symbols; and a moderate interest in the difference between the various genres (Lothe, et al. 177-178). This latter point is elaborated by Mary Gerhart, who claims that New Criticism showed “a certain nonchalance towards genres – a tendency to accept them as given and to take them for granted” (57). Thus I differ from the New Critics in that I take the concept of genres up for discussion, although this is not an essential part of my thesis. The essential part of my thesis is, as stated above, the question of fairy tale elements in a selection of Oscar Wilde’s works. In addition to using Propp’s functions as a basis for deciding how fairy tale-like the various works are, I will also focus on differences and similarities within and between the texts, in terms of themes, symbols, language usage and structure.

New Criticism is “mainly an Anglo-American school of thought within literary theory and criticism. It was dominant in the US in the 1940s and 1950s, but has later been strongly rejected from many quarters” (Skei 19, my translation). Still, I feel that this is a theory of many constructive ideas, and that it is one that fits well with my wish to study Wilde’s works independently in light of the Formalist Propp’s fairy tale functions. As Hans H. Skei continues to state: “New Criticism is Formalistic and emphasises close reading and analysis of the literary work as an independent and restricted phenomenon (the theory of autonomy)” (19, my translation). New Criticism is not a unified movement as such, but rather a collective term for critics with a similar view of how to study literature, all emphasising the dangers of the intentional and the affective fallacies. Skei defines the first fallacy as “searching for the author’s intentions in the text” and the latter one as “studying readers’ reactions to the text” (19, my translation). He also states that, like the Formalists, “the New Critics emphasise literature as literature, considering it to be different from other types of writing” (19, my translation). This is a point where one might question if New Criticism is in fact a dated theory. Arne Melberg points

out in an article in *Dagbladet* that “the boundaries between ‘fictional prose’ and ‘factual prose’ worry mediators of culture as well as publishers and literary critics” (Melberg, my translation). He discusses today’s trend of blurring the lines between facts and fiction, of including elements of both in the same work. However, the texts to be studied in my thesis were written over a century before Melberg’s article. Although it is possible to interpret elements of Wilde’s own life into his works, there is no questioning that the works I will study are in fact fiction. “All students of literature know that a requirement for understanding and studying the novel as a fictitious novel is that one separates between author and narrator and keeps the author outside the analysis of the fiction (where, on the other hand, the narrator belongs)” (Melberg, my translation). This is what I will do – study a selection of Wilde’s works as fictitious and separated from the author.

At the close of this introductory chapter, I allow myself a lapse from the above statement, and quote Wilde, the person, who is said to have stated when passing through US customs: “I have nothing to declare except my genius” (Jones 1075). At my peril, I will go beneath the surface of Wilde’s art to see what more there was to this genius than quick remarks and truth-revealing epigrams, to see what is left when his art stands on its own.

2 – The Fairy Tales

*“I am rather afraid that I have annoyed him,” answered the Linnet.
“The fact is, that I told him a story with a moral.”
“Ah! that is always a very dangerous thing to do,” said the Duck.*

(“The Devoted Friend”, *FT* 55)

Vladimir Propp opens the foreword to his *Morphology of the Folktale* by stating that “[t]he word ‘morphology’ means the study of forms” (xxv). With such an opening, he emphasises that that exact term used in the title – morphology – is essential for the understanding of the chapters that follow. This signifies not only that Propp himself was a true Formalist, but also that his work treats the importance of form and structure when considering “tales in the strictest sense of the word” (xxv), fairy tales.

The fairy tale genre is indeed form-bound, being based on an oral tradition of repetition of fixed structures. Originally, these structures were part of a number of devices that helped narrators remember and retell the tales. As fairy tales of various kinds in various cultures were told again and again, the traditional elements of repetition, trebling, and the like became part of what defined this type of stories as fairy tales. Propp takes this one step further when he presents a list consisting of thirty-one general “functions” as a “measuring unit for the individual tales” (65). The functions are defined by what type of character performs them, and what consequences they have for the development of the tale. Claiming that “components of one tale can, without any alteration whatsoever, be transferred to another” (Propp 7), Propp designates each function to correspond to a given part of any tale. A tale’s functions always appear in the same given order. However, all thirty-one functions are rarely, if ever, represented in one and the same tale.

According to Propp, a tale's functions form the basis that makes the tale. As he specifies: "The question of *what* a tale's dramatis personae do is an important one for the study of the tale, but the questions of *who* does it and *how* it is done already fall within the province of accessory study" (20). Thus an analysis of a fairy tale should focus on what actually happens. However, especially in non-traditional, written fairy tales, literary symbols, such as for example the use of specific colours, are used as a means for drawing attention to certain elements of the tale, as well as for giving hints about future events or about a character's nature. In Oscar Wilde's fairy tales, there is also a significant amount of religious symbolism. This might seem somewhat in discord with the fairy tale genre as such, seeing as the old, traditional fairy tales often included elements associated with pre-Christian, heathen traditions. The values emphasised, though, are the same in most fairy tales – generosity, kindness, empathy with those less fortunate than oneself, and in general keeping an open mind and a pure heart. These values are in accordance with Christian beliefs, and so is the recurring fairy tale plot of the good against the evil. Both fairy tales and Christianity are concerned with the struggle between the good and the bad. What is peculiar in Wilde's tales is that the importance of the values of the good side is often emphasised by the fact that the good does not always seem to win. In fact, it is quite typical that the reader is left disappointed and disillusioned, but nonetheless contemplative, after reading Wilde's tales.

On the following page, Propp's thirty-one fairy tale functions (*Morphology* 26-64) are presented. On the left side are the symbols and numbers designated by Propp to each function, and on the right are his definitions – what the functions are called – followed by short descriptions of the respective functions in parenthesis. The "initial situation" is the typical opening scene of a fairy tale. This element is not considered a function in itself, but is still an important element of a tale's structure.

α	<i>Initial situation</i>
β – I	<i>Absentation</i> (one of the members of a family absents himself from home)
γ – II	<i>Interdiction</i> (an interdiction is addressed to the hero)
δ – III	<i>Violation</i> (the interdiction is violated)
ε – IV	<i>Reconnaissance</i> (the villain makes an attempt at reconnaissance)
ζ – V	<i>Delivery</i> (the villain receives information about his victim, often as a result of function IV)
η – VI	<i>Trickery</i> (the villain attempts to deceive his victim in order to take possession of him or his belongings)
θ – VII	<i>Complicity</i> (the victim submits to deception and unwittingly helps his enemy)
λ	<i>Preliminary misfortune</i> (the victim complies as a result of being in a difficult situation that is deliberately caused by the villain)
A – VIII	<i>Villainy</i> (the villain causes harm or injury to a member of the hero's family)
a – VIIIa	<i>Lack</i> (a member of the family lacks something or desires to have something)
B – IX	<i>Mediation, the connective incident</i> (misfortune or lack is made known; the hero is approached with a request or command; he is allowed to go or he is dispatched. Becomes clear whether the hero is a seeker hero or a victim hero)
C – X	<i>Beginning counteraction</i> (the hero agrees to or decides upon counteraction) (only when the hero is a seeker)
\uparrow – XI	<i>Departure</i> (the hero leaves home) (seeker and victim heroes)
D – XII	<i>The first function of the donor/provider</i> (the hero is tested, interrogated, attacked, etc., which prepares the way for his receiving either a magical agent or helper)
E – XIII	<i>The hero's reaction</i> (the hero reacts (positively or negatively) to the actions of the future donor)
F – XIV	<i>Provision or receipt of a magical agent or helper</i> (the hero acquires the use of a magical agent)
Fneg.	If the hero's reaction is negative, transference of agent may not occur, or can be replaced by cruel retribution
G – XV	<i>Spatial transference between two kingdoms, guidance</i> (the hero is transferred, delivered, or led to the whereabouts of an object of search)
H – XVI	<i>Struggle</i> (the hero and the villain join in direct combat)
J – XVII	<i>Branding/markings</i> (the hero is branded, e.g. wounded)
I – XVIII	<i>Victory</i> (the villain is defeated)
K – XIX	<i>Liquidation</i> (the initial misfortune or lack is liquidated)
\downarrow – XX	<i>Return</i> (the hero returns)
Pr – XXI	<i>Pursuit, chase</i> (the hero is pursued)
Rs – XXII	<i>Rescue</i> (the hero is rescued from pursuit)
O – XXIII	<i>Unrecognised arrival</i> (the hero, unrecognised, arrives home or in another country – e.g. to serve as cook with a foreign king)
L – XXIV	<i>Unfounded claims</i> (presented by a false hero)
M – XXV	<i>Difficult task</i> (a difficult task is proposed to the hero)
N – XXVI	<i>Solution</i> (the task is resolved)
Q – XXVII	<i>Recognition</i> (the hero is recognised, typically because of his brand/mark or a thing given to him)
Ex – XXVIII	<i>Exposure</i> (the false hero or villain is exposed)
T – XXIX	<i>Transfiguration</i> (the hero is given a new appearance, e.g. a boy becomes a wealthy prince, a beast becomes handsome, a girl puts on a magical dress and is suddenly admired by everyone, etc.)
U – XXX	<i>Punishment</i> (the villain is punished)
W – XXXI	<i>Wedding</i> (the hero is married and ascends the throne)

All functions are fulfilled by a specific type of character. The main character roles in fairy tales according to Propp are the hero, the villain, the helper, and the donor/provider. The donor/provider typically has a relatively large part in the tale. He or she is the character that fulfils function XII (D) by testing or interrogating the hero, a function which often leads to the hero's reception of a magical agent or helper (F). The helper, on the other hand, usually makes a brief appearance (often in the form of a tree/bush, an animal, or an old hag) to provide the hero with information, advice, or magical objects; things that will normally turn out to be of vital importance for the hero's successful fulfilment of his or her quest. In addition, Propp draws attention to the princess (a sought-for person) and her father; the dispatcher; and the false hero. The dispatcher's role is to allow or to make – depending on the tale's preconditions – the hero to go off on his or her quest, whereas the false hero appears on the scene to lay difficulties in the hero's path. The various functions can be divided into “spheres of action” on the basis of who performs them. Propp points out three possibilities as to how these spheres are “distributed among individual tale characters” (80). These are:

1. *The sphere of action exactly corresponds to the character.*
2. *One character is involved in several spheres of action.*
3. *A single sphere of action is distributed among several characters.* (80)

In Wilde's tales, it is not uncommon that one character is involved in several spheres – that various roles are fulfilled by one and the same character. Without going into further detail about the problems Propp discusses concerning characters in the tales, it is necessary to clarify that he does not necessarily see the hero as the character that seems to hold the most prevalent role in a tale. A character becomes the hero on the basis of which functions he or she fulfils, and not on the basis of the size of his or her part in the tale. The hero is nonetheless usually one of the major characters present in a tale. As concerns the role of another important character-type in fairy tales, the villain, this part tends to be somewhat more blurred in Wilde's tales than in many other

kinds of tales. Wilde does not always introduce one specific, evil character, but villainy is still undeniably present in his tales. The different forms of villainy in Wilde's tales will be discussed further in the subsequent passages on the individual tales.

In addition to the thirty-one functions, Propp also mentions some other elements of the fairy tale genre. The first of these are the "Auxiliary Elements for the Interconnection of Functions" (71), which include informing a character that has not yet been a part of the action about what has happened, and thus connect two functions that either do not follow each other directly or that are fulfilled by different characters. Propp also includes "Auxiliary Elements in Trebling" (74) and "Motivations" (75). The elements assisting trebling are simply whatever joins the first instance of something to the second, or the second to the third. Motivations are explained as "both the reasons and the aims of personages which cause them to commit various acts" (75). Common for all these non-function elements is that they are more or less important parts of a tale, without being of significant consequence for its development.

An example of auxiliary elements for the interconnection of functions in Wilde's works can be found in the fairy tale "The Happy Prince". A swallow (the tale's hero) lands to rest on a statue of a prince, and the statue informs the bird of how happy he was when he was alive and how unhappy he is now to see so much suffering in the city over which he has a great view. Thus the swallow is informed of what I see as the villainy (A) in this tale – the general villainy of poverty and suffering. Seeing as this is not one specific instance of villainy, counteraction and departure (C↑) does not follow directly from this. They have in fact already been fulfilled as functions that lead to the bird's meeting with the statue and the following distribution of information. This information connects the swallow's previous departure from home to the first function of the donor (D) – in this case the statue of the Happy Prince – the testing of the hero.

“The Happy Prince” is the title story of Wilde’s first collection of fairy tales, *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* (1888). It tells the tale of the aforementioned swallow and his encounter with the statue of the Happy Prince, who was thus called because he was so joyful and carefree when he was alive. Now, on the other hand, he is sorrowful and distraught as he from his pedestal can see the suffering of the poor people in the city. The swallow is persuaded to bring the statue’s valuable decorations to those who truly need it, and consequently lingers in the city long after he should have left for Egypt. After giving away the prince’s sapphire eyes, the swallow decides not to go at all, but stays on to support his blinded friend. Eventually the swallow dies from the cold, suffering the statue’s leaden heart to break in two. Both the dead bird and the broken heart are discarded onto a dust heap, but are later collected by an angel and brought to God who says that “in my garden of Paradise this little bird shall sing for evermore, and in my city of gold the Happy Prince shall praise me” (FT 22). Their sacrifices were rewarded at last.

The initial situation (α) in the tale about the (un)Happy Prince is describing the statue and how both the statue and its real-life model are admired and praised by everyone in the city. From these first passages, it is tempting to see the introduction of the Happy Prince as the introduction of the tale’s hero. However, it is in fact the swallow who turns out to be the one to fill the functions connected with the part of the hero. With the introduction of these two characters, Wilde has made use of a typical fairy tale trait in that a statue and a bird are personified, they are given human qualities. If we focus on the bird, the hero, it is possible to see the other birds’ leaving for Egypt as absention (β). In this case, though, it is not one member of the family leaving home, but the entire family moving the home southward and leaving one member behind. Before they left, the other swallows showed a certain scepticism towards the hero’s attachment to the reed with which he had fallen in love, which can be seen as a sort of interdiction (γ). This

interdiction is knowingly violated (δ) by the swallow, who stayed with the reed for six weeks after his fellow swallows left for warmer parts of the world.

Function VIII, villainy (A), is fulfilled in a somewhat more abstract way than phrased by Propp. As mentioned above, I see the villainy in this tale as “the general villainy of poverty and suffering” (15). Thus, rather than acting (C) and departing (\uparrow) as a result of villainy, the swallow discovers the villainy as a result of his departure from the reed. Although not an apparently significant part of the plot, this departure is essential for the tale’s development as it takes the hero to the situation that confirms his status as hero through his reactions and actions. In accordance with Propp’s scheme “the first function of the donor” (D) follows directly after this departure (\uparrow). Strictly speaking, the first function of the donor in “The Happy Prince” is actually that of providing a refuge where the swallow can stop to rest. Soon after he has landed on the pedestal, the swallow notices that the statue is crying. Filled with pity, the bird asks the prince why he is sad, and the scene is set for the testing (D) of the hero to begin. In true fairy tale style, the prince tells of a poor seamstress and asks: “Swallow, Swallow, little Swallow, will you not bring her the ruby of my sword-hilt?” (*FT* 13) After a short passage of hesitation and persuasion, function XIII (E) is fulfilled when the hero reacts positively to the donor/tester and agrees to help him. This pattern is repeated two more times, making a classic total of three similar tests fulfilled after three similar exchanges of lines. However, the swallow does not receive a magical agent (F) as the result of the tests, but he is later rewarded in that function XXIX, transfiguration (T), is fulfilled through the Lord’s angel bringing the dead bird to sing for ever in Paradise.

All through “The Happy Prince” various contrasts are prevalent. The poverty of the citizens is emphasised by the description of the Happy Prince’s life of carefree luxury in the Palace of Sans-Souci. This also introduces the question of whether such extravagant living in fact

brings happiness. The Happy Prince used to think so, but was consequently all the more troubled when he as a statue discovered the dreadful conditions of others in the city in which he had lived. As the prince himself puts it: “happy indeed I was, if pleasure be happiness” (*FT* 12). It seems that the prince has become aware that there are other kinds of happiness more worth than material pleasure and ornamental beauty. The statue’s ensuing loss of beauty is contrasted with the children’s gain of health and happiness as a result of the statue and the swallow’s good deeds:

Leaf after leaf of the fine gold the Swallow picked off, till the Happy Prince looked quite dull and grey. Leaf after leaf of the fine gold he brought to the poor, and the children’s faces grew rosier, and they laughed and played games in the street. (*FT* 20)

On the previous page of the tale, the same children are described in another contrastive setting, one that makes apparent the hopeless conditions under which they lived: “[The Swallow] flew into dark lanes, and saw the *white* faces of starving children looking out listlessly at the *black* streets” (*FT* 19, my italics). After the prince gave up his beauty for their sake, however, the said faces became coloured, and in the streets children were playing joyfully. It is made evident that the beauty of the statue’s decorations was worth much more when torn off and spread among others, than as parts of one single object of admiration.

The idea put forth is that beauty is often linked with shallowness. This is also shown in the very beginning of the tale, when the swallow stops to court the reed because he was “so attracted by her slender waist” (*FT* 10). It is interesting to note that after a relatively short while, the swallow “tired of his lady-love”, complaining that “[s]he has no conversation” (*FT* 11). The swallow realises that there is more to life than beauty, and takes off on the journey that is to lead him to the challenge that thoroughly confirms this assertion. In the end, he dies for the cause of sacrificing superficial beauty for the sake of heightening the quality of the lives of others.

Other elements that play a relatively large role in this tale, and, as I will point out later, in other parts of Wilde's fiction, are the moon and various elements associated with it, such as crystal, silver and frost. These elements are also associated with wealth, as well as with coldness. We are told of frosty streets looking "as if they were made of silver" and "long icicles like crystal daggers" (*FT* 20). Throughout, Wilde creates a sensation of a negative, cold sphere, in which the swallow dies, the Happy Prince's leaden heart breaks in two as a result of the "dreadfully hard frost" (*FT* 21), and the Mayor and town councillors are cold personalities lacking in empathic emotions. The use of words like "daggers" opens for the notion that an infatuation with crystal and other symbols of prosperity can be corrupting to human nature, and just as lethal – at least to the mind and soul – as pointed weapons. On the other hand we have the kind warmth of the compassionate actions of the little swallow and the Happy Prince, as illustrated by the dialogue between the hero and his donor when the swallow returns after his first round of giving away the statue's valuable decor: "It is curious,' [the swallow] remarked, 'but I feel quite warm now, although it is so cold.' 'That is because you have done a good action,' said the prince" (*FT* 15), underlining the fact that true feeling of contentment comes from within, and not from the collection of material goods.

Whenever the swallow bids the statue farewell and tries to leave for Egypt, the moon is up. This does not only signify the time of the day, but is also a reflection of the first meeting between the bird and the gilded statue, when "tears were running down [the Happy Prince's] golden cheeks. His face was so beautiful in the moonlight that the little swallow was filled with pity" (*FT* 12). Here, the soft moonlight can be seen as an ill-boding omen – the beauty of the prince and the pang of emotions in the bird mirroring the beauty of the deeds to come, and the cold light of the night being a warning of the graveness of the hero's future sacrifice, the sacrifice of his own life. The swallow's death is also foreshadowed by the coming of the snow. This is an

established literary symbol, and does not add specifically to the fairy tale elements of the story. Nonetheless, it is a noteworthy means for preparing the reader for what is about to follow when the swallow proclaims that “it is winter . . . and the chill snow will soon be here” (*FT* 17). As foreshadowed, the inevitable snow comes and the swallow dies. Wilde continues the cold imagery when he writes that at the same time as the swallow fell dead at the statue’s feet, “a curious crack sounded inside the statue, as if something had broken. The fact is that the leaden heart had snapped right in two. It certainly was a dreadfully hard frost” (*FT* 20-21). In addition to underline the Happy Prince’s sorrow at the death of his friend, the “dreadfully hard frost” can be read as a more down-to-earth explanation – the cold was so extreme that it made metal crack. Thus the phrase makes a transition to the appearance of the unromantic Mayor and the Town Councillors in the next sentence. They have no knowledge of why the statue of the Happy Prince is no longer golden and beautiful, and they agree that in its present state, the statue is “little better than a beggar” (*FT* 21). On seeing the little swallow at the prince’s feet, unaware of the fact that it gave its life for the good of the people of the city, the Mayor suggests to “issue a proclamation that birds are not to be allowed to die here” (*FT* 21). The swallow is discarded in a dust-heap, and so is the “broken lead heart” that “will not melt in the furnace” (*FT* 22) in which the statue is thrown to allow the metal to be used for a new one. Who should be the model for the new statue is a question about which the Mayor and the town Councillors began quarrelling. Wilde writes that “[w]hen I last heard of them they were quarrelling still” (*FT* 21). Leaving characters in the middle of an activity for an unspecified length of time is typical of the fairy tale genre. It is a way of writing/telling characters out of the tale – no one will expect to hear any more about someone who is “doing something still”.

In this tale, the fact that the Mayor and Town Councillors are left quarrelling can also be seen as punishment (U). It is possible to see the materialistic and unsympathetic members of the

council as unwitting helpers of the tale's abstract villain, and they should consequently suffer some sort of punishment. Seeing, though, as they are not evil characters as such, the punishment should not be too hard. It seems appropriate that they are not killed or mutilated as fairy tale villains often are, but left to quarrel for an indeterminate space of time. Quarrelling is no wishful situation, and compared with the Happy Prince and the little swallow's elevation to Paradise, the Mayor and his men can be said to be left in a kind of Purgatory. Although it does not seem likely, the possibility is left open that they can emerge purged and with an attitude more in accordance with the virtues impersonated by the statue and the bird. In spite of this slight hope for better times in the city, though, it is more likely that the men will keep quarrelling and that the poor children again will go cold and hungry. Given that the hero is in fact dead, function XXXI is not fulfilled with the typical wedding and acquirement of at least half a kingdom. Still, the tale does not end on a completely tragic note, seeing as both the hero and his donor are brought to the Kingdom of Paradise.

In one of his other works, the play *Lady Windermere's Fan*, Wilde has one of the characters proclaim that "we are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars" (CW 417). In "The Happy Prince", this idea is reversed: the ones closest to the stars, a statue on a high pedestal and a bird, are the ones who are looking at the gutter. Staring at the stars, dreaming and hoping might do good for an individual's peace of mind, but in addition to believing that something better than the present reality is possible, one must face the facts and be ready to offer personal sacrifices to achieve improvement. This readiness to sacrifice a relatively large part of what little one has often appears in fairy tales as the hero's positive reaction (E) to the test (D) he or she is set by the donor. In "The Happy Prince" the swallow offers the ultimate sacrifice as he knowingly gives up his life to help the prince. When it has become clear that the swallow will never get to Egypt, he still dreams about the land where the "sun is warm on the green palm-

trees, and the crocodiles lie in the mud and look lazily about them” (FT 17). The dream helps him keep up his spirits as he together with the prince renders his share to make the world a better place.

“The Nightingale and the Rose” also stars a bird as hero, or in fact as heroine. The initial situation (α) of this tale is that of a young student crying over the fact that his love has proclaimed that she will dance with him at the prince’s ball the following day only if he brings her a red rose. In his *Morphology of the Folktale*, Propp states that “[m]orphologically, a tale (skàzka) may be termed any development from villainy (A) or lack (a). . .” (92). The latter is the starting point for “The Nightingale and the Rose”: the student has no red roses in his garden. To fulfil function IX, the connective incident in which misfortune or lack is made known (B), the student talks aloud to himself in his garden, proclaiming his despair. He thus asserts himself as a dispatcher. The nightingale sees him as the epitomised true lover, the one she has sung of in her songs, and decides upon counteraction (C) to help him find the red rose he needs to come closer to the realisation of love. The nightingale leaves the oak tree in which she had her nest (\uparrow), and flies around in the student’s garden, talking to three different rose-trees. The same exchange is repeated each time: “‘Give me a red rose,’ she cried, ‘and I will sing you my sweetest song.’ But the Tree shook its head” (FT 25-26). The first tree bore white flowers and the second one yellow. The third did normally bear red roses, but the wind and the frost had prevented it from having any flowers at all this year. One red rose could, however, be produced if the nightingale would pierce her heart on a thorn and sing all night as her blood flowed into the tree. The nightingale has now met her donor, the rose-tree, which in its turn has presented the heroine with her test (D). The nightingale decides that “Love is better than Life” (FT 27) and sacrifices herself for the victory of love. This positive reaction (E) and the successful fulfilment of the test, lead to the hero’s reception of a magical agent (F), in this case the red rose. The rose was brought about by magical

means, and is the object that is supposed to open the door for the student to enter into the realm of love.

In *Fairy Tales: Allegories of the Inner Life*, J. C. Cooper points out that in fairy tales, a character's soul is closely connected to his or her heart (130). In *Inside the Wolf's Belly: Aspects of the Fairy Tale*, Joyce Thomas points out in a similar vein that "blood is used as another . . . popular representation of the soul or 'elan vital'" (192). It is not coincidental that the rose-tree's thorn must pierce the Nightingale's heart and her life-blood be transfused into the veins of the tree before the flower can fully come into existence. The heroine's soul can be said to flow with the blood from her heart into the tree and become a part of the red rose. Thus, function XV, spatial transference (G), does not only lead the heroine to the object of search in this tale, but actually merges her with it. It might be stretching the interpretation too far to claim that the rose becomes the hero/heroine of the tale, but it is nonetheless a symbol of the heroine's highest ideal, true love, and her unbending faith that this ideal could become reality through her own sacrifice. This, however, does not happen. The dead hero, symbolised by the rose, and the villain, the girl with whom the student has fallen in love, meet in combat (H) when the student appears at his loved one's house with the red rose and great expectations for the evening's ball. She frowns and declares: "I am afraid it will not go with my dress" (FT 31). She underlines her materialistic attitude when she continues to say that "the Chamberlain's nephew has sent me some real jewels, and everybody knows that jewels cost far more than flowers" (FT 31). The student is angry and disappointed, and "he threw the rose into the street, where it fell into the gutter, and a cart-wheel went over it" (FT 31). The student's hope for love is totally crushed together with the rose. No one is to be left in doubt as to the complete victory of the villainous side, or rather the total loss of the good side, seeing as no one really stands out as victorious and satisfied at the end of this tale. The student concludes that love is a "silly thing" and "not half as useful as logic" (FT 31). It

is understandable why he feels this way, but nonetheless disappointing. The ultimate sacrifice of the nightingale has led to nothing.

Up until the struggle (H), “The Nightingale and the Rose” coincides well with Propp’s presentation of the fairy tale functions – functions VIIIa through XVI are all fulfilled in chronological order. That the hero does not come out of the struggle branded, yet victorious, stands in contrast with what one would expect, but as in “The Happy Prince”, the core message of the tale makes an even deeper impression through the fact that the hero dies for the cause he or she believes in. In “The Nightingale and the Rose”, this cause is the idea that love is worth fighting for and making sacrifices for, even though the outcome is not always as successful as anticipated. Still, however moving the nightingale’s sacrifice is, disillusionment is unavoidable as the story develops and the rose is discarded together with the student’s belief in love. As the tale ends, one might feel that the nightingale is a sort of Don Quixote character, a somewhat naïve idealist with an image of the world as something different and more fantastic – in all senses of the word – than it in fact is. Contrary to the man from la Mancha, however, there is nothing comic about the nightingale and her fate.

As in “The Happy Prince”, the moon is present as symbol and creator of mood in this tale. The melancholy of the scene where the nightingale set her breast against the thorn and began to sing is emphasised by the fact that “the cold crystal Moon leaned down and listened” (FT 28). Towards the end of the Nightingale’s song, just before the sun was about to rise, the thorn touched her heart and her song escalated parallel with her pain. Then, as her voice grew fainter and she was about to give in to death:

she gave one last burst of music. The white Moon heard it, and she forgot the dawn, and lingered on in the sky. The red rose heard it, and it trembled all over with ecstasy, and opened its petals to the cold morning air. Echo bore it

to her purple cavern in the hills, and woke the sleeping shepherds from their dreams. It floated through the reeds of the river, and they carried its message to the sea. (FT 30)

In this passage, the cool, ominous white of the moon is contrasted with the red of the rose. Red is the colour of love and passion, as well as of blood and pain. The red rose connects all four – the blood and pain of the nightingale opens the possibility for love and passion in the student's life. However, as the lingering moon predicts, this tale is a Wildean tale, and all cannot turn out well. Thus the student is rejected, the rose discarded, and the reader disappointed as the tale's dispatcher, the one who started it all, "returned to his room and pulled out a great dusty book, and began to read" (FT 31).

Another effect of the presence of the moon is that the reader's attention is drawn towards the heavens and the unearthly. The fact that the heroine is a bird contributes to the idea that she stands somewhere between heaven and earth, she can move in both spheres. As Jack Zipes points out in *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion*, "[b]irds have always been messengers of the gods since they symbolize flight, ascent to the heavens and the transcendence of higher states of consciousness" (123). In "The Nightingale and the Rose", the bird can be seen not only as a messenger of God, but as a part of him, a figure of Christ sacrificing his own life for the sake of love, the thorn having connotations with both Christ's crown of thorns and the cross on which he was crucified.

The idea of a Christ-like figure conveying the importance of love and generosity of heart is also present in several of Wilde's other tales. In "The Selfish Giant", this figure appears in the shape of a little boy who makes the tale's hero, the giant of the title, realise that his selfish ways are not the right ones. This tale's initial situation (α) is a picturesque one. The giant is away visiting a Cornish ogre, and every afternoon while he is gone, children gather to play in his beautiful garden with flowers, peach-trees and songbirds. Then, an inverted absention (β)

occurs as the giant returns home. Following this, there is also an inverted interdiction (γ), as the hero forbids the children to play in his garden. “My own garden is my own garden” (*FT* 34), the giant says and puts up a noticeboard proclaiming: “Trespassers will be prosecuted” (*FT* 34). This interdiction is later to be violated (δ) when the children discover a hole in the garden wall. As in “The Nightingale and the Rose”, villainy (A) is here replaced by lack (a): the giant lacks knowledge of the value of personal qualities such as generosity and kindness. This lack does, however, not go without consequences; when the children were forced to leave the garden, spring and summer disappeared as well, and the garden fell victim to snow, frost, and harsh winds.

After a long time of ever-lasting winter, the children crept back in through the hole in the giant’s wall. As they climbed the trees, life returned to the garden: “The birds were flying about and twittering with delight, and the flowers were looking up through the green grass and laughing” (*FT* 36). A connective incident (B) now takes place as the view of the children playing in the once again blooming garden makes the giant realise how unfulfilling his isolated life has been. In one corner of the garden, a single tree is left without a child in it, and beneath it a boy is crying because he is too small to reach its branches. Winter would not leave that corner, and the giant exclaimed: “now I know why the Spring would not come here” (*FT* 36). He then decides upon counteraction (C), saying: “I will put that poor little boy on the top of the tree, and then I will knock down the wall, and my garden shall be the children’s playground for ever and ever” (*FT* 36-37). Following this assertion, departure (\uparrow) is fulfilled as the giant goes out into the garden to do as he has said. When the children see him, they are frightened and run away. However, the little boy remains, asserting himself as the donor of the tale. The crying boy in need of the giant’s help is in fact testing (D) him. The giant reacts positively (E) as he rightly decides to open his heart as well as his garden for the children – their Paradise lost is regained. As a result

of the testing, the giant does not receive a magical agent or helper (F) as such, but he is rewarded with the magic feelings of satisfaction and happiness through his own generosity. So far, then, “The Selfish Giant” consists of functions VIIIa through XIII, in addition to functions I, II, and III. Liquidation (K) now follows as the giant’s initial lack of values is dissolved, and the tale continues to describe a happier giant than before. However, he is not completely satisfied. He longs to meet again the little boy who has not been seen by anyone since the day he changed the giant’s life. One winter morning years later, the two are finally reunited. The giant suddenly sees through his window that the tree that had once hesitated to bloom is now filled with blossoms, in spite of the frost. “Its branches were all golden, and silver fruit hung down from them, and underneath it stood the little boy [the giant] had loved” (*FT* 38). The giant runs out into the garden, sees the stigmata on the boy’s hands and feet, and realises that the child is really the impersonation of Christ. The final function of this tale, transfiguration (T), is fulfilled as the giant kneels before the boy who says: “You let me play once in your garden, to-day you shall come with me to my garden, which is Paradise” (*FT* 39). Like the swallow in “The Happy Prince”, the hero of “The Selfish Giant” is given a new form, his earthly self being a dead body while his soul is taken to a place of everlasting happiness.

The giant’s death, though, is not a typical fairy tale death. As J.C. Cooper points out, “[t]he only thing that is unthinkable is that any hero should dwindle into obscurity, senility or disease” (86). When the boy comes to take the giant with him to Paradise, he comes for a giant who is “old and feeble” and who “could not play about any more, so he sat in a huge armchair and watched the children at their games, and admired his garden” (*FT* 38). However moving the giant’s death is, it is not an obviously heroic death like that of the birds in the previous tales. Then again, the giant is not a heroic hero as such. He is the kind of hero that has to learn a lesson in order to fulfil himself, and not one that makes a stand by giving up his life for an ideal. In this

respect he resembles an existentialist hero, emphasising the individual and his making the choice that is right for himself, without focusing on others. The paradox is that what is right for the hero in this case is to be less selfish. The giant, though hesitant at first, learns that his life is more meaningful when he acts in a more generous and friendly manner. The initial problem was thus not that the giant was evil, but that he – like the Mayor and town councillors in “The Happy Prince” – had not been shown what was good. Cooper claims that “many who appear hostile are, in fact, suffering under some spell or enchantment and are really people waiting for release” (124). The giant fits into this category, even though the “spell” under which he suffers is not a magic one, and he does not take on human form when it is lifted. He truly is a giant, but as he is released from the “spell” of aggressive egocentrism he becomes a more fulfilled and contented giant.

The matter-of-fact way in which Wilde describes that the giant “had been to visit his friend the Cornish ogre” (*FT* 33) is typical of the fairy tale genre. The existence of giants and ogres is taken as given and seen as just as natural as the fact that children like to play in a big and beautiful garden. However, with regard to symbols and other literary means, this tale is dominated by religious aspects. For example in the description of the initial situation, we are told that in the garden “there were twelve peach-trees that in the spring-time broke out into delicate blossoms of pink and pearl, and in the autumn bore rich fruit” (*FT* 33). Traditionally, fairy tales tend to make use of so-called magic numbers, especially the numbers three, seven, and multiples thereof, as exemplified when we are told that the giant had been staying with the ogre for seven years. The number twelve is multipliable by three, and it occurs in both art and folk tales. However, twelve is traditionally not counted among the most commonly used magic numbers, and thus the specified number of peach trees in the giant’s garden appears to be significant. The number twelve brings to mind the number of disciples following Christ. The fact that the trees

symbolising the disciples are so closely connected with children, and as it turns out Christ himself is represented by a child, introduces the idea of a more explicit allusion to the Bible, to Mark 10: 13-15, where it is written:

¹³ And they brought young children to him, that he should touch them: and his disciples rebuked those that brought them. ¹⁴ But when Jesus saw it, he was much displeased, and said unto them, Suffer the little children to come unto me, and forbid them not: for of such is the kingdom of God. ¹⁵ Verily I say unto you, Whosoever shall not receive the kingdom of God as a little child, he shall not enter therein.

When the giant realises that the boy is in fact Christ, we are told that “a strange awe fell on him, and he knelt before the little child” (*FT* 39). The striking contrast portrayed in this scene – the large giant kneeling reverentially in front of the little boy – contributes to present Christ as a great spiritual power.

In many ways, “The Selfish Giant” resembles a parable as much as a fairy tale. Nonetheless, it does fulfil a considerable amount of Propp’s functions as well as include a number of other fairy tale aspects. The style of writing is in the same poetic yet matter-of-fact, artistic yet oral language as in Wilde’s other tales. In keeping with fairy tale tradition, weather conditions and the seasons of the year are personified, enabling the Snow and the Frost to invite the North Wind, who came wrapped in furs, while the Autumn said that the giant was too selfish to be given any fruit on his trees (*FT* 35). Another fairy tale element in “The Selfish Giant” is the use of a bird as herald. A linnet brings the message to the giant that children and summer have returned to his garden. The giant heard music that “sounded so sweet to his ears that he thought it must be the King’s musicians passing by” (*FT* 35), and he looked out his window onto a garden that had been transformed. Joyce Thomas has pointed out that along with the frog, the bird is a popular herald figure in fairy tales, “[t]he physical reality of both creatures initially makes them ideal heralds and representatives of the supernatural; each acts in the tales as a dual herald, of the

future and of the fantastic” (139). This is certainly true of the little linnet who heralds the return of the children to the garden and thereby the future happiness of the giant’s life, as well as the fantastic element of the giant later being brought to the garden of Paradise.

The swallow in “The Happy Prince” was also taken to the garden of Paradise, and one might assume, or at least hope, that so was the nightingale in “The Nightingale and the Rose”. Still, “The Selfish Giant” is dominated by a lighter and happier tone than the other two tales. Here, there is a more optimistic line throughout; doing what one sees as right does not necessarily mean having to die for it.

Like most literary works, the previously discussed tales from *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* include elements that both confirm and invalidate their status as belonging to one specific genre, in this case that of fairy tales. In addition to the various aspects such as style of writing, use of symbols, and the like, the analyses based on Propp’s functions have confirmed these fairy tales as being just that. Wilde’s next collection of fairy tales, *A House of Pomegranates* (1891), consists of four tales that to some extent differ from those of the earlier volume. The most striking differences are that they are longer and even more elaborate and ornate in terms of language usage. This is, however, not to say that they are less fairy tale-like than the other tales. All four make use of a variety of fairy tale elements, but “The Star-Child” stands out as being the one with the most apparent fairy tale features. It even opens with the phrase “Once upon a time” (FT 181). As mentioned in the introductory chapter of this thesis, the discussion of fairy tale elements in Wilde’s fairy tales will serve as a basis for the following discussion of fairy tale elements in other parts of Wilde’s body of work. Thus – without saying that the other tales in *A House of Pomegranates* are not true fairy tales – I have chosen to focus on the tale in this collection that embodies the most apparent fairy tale features and which consequently is the most suitable one to function as a ground for the further discussion.

The initial situation (α) in “The Star-Child” is that of two poor woodcutters on their way home through a forest on an extremely cold winter night. They see a star falling from heaven, and go to it. They hope to find “a crock of gold” (*FT* 184) where the star fell to the ground, but instead they find a little child wrapped in “a cloak of golden tissue, curiously wrought with stars” (*FT* 184). This is an involuntary absention (β), as the child, the tale’s hero, is lost from his family. It is, however, also an allusion to the Bible and the Star of Bethlehem leading the Magi to the newborn Christ. There are also other hints at Biblical references in this tale. For example the description of the citizens praising the Star-Child, as he comes to be called, as their lord on his return to the city after the third day of searching for gold in the forest brings associations to Christ’s entrance into Jerusalem. It turns out that the Star-Child is a king’s son, but he is no apparent figure of Christ. On the contrary, he grows up to be incredibly beautiful, but also mean-spirited, selfish and arrogant, and he shows nothing but contempt towards the woodcutter who brought him home and included him in his poor, but kind family.

Repeatedly, interdictions (γ) are addressed to the Star-Child as he is told to be less proud, cruel, and pitiless. Repeatedly, he violates (δ) these interdictions, acting as an arrogant Narcissus mocking those who are less beautiful than himself, and throwing stones at beggars passing through the village. As with some of the previously discussed tales, this one does not include a specific villain or apparent villainy as a function (A), but there is lack (a). The Star-Child suffers from a lacking sense of identity, not knowing who his parents are or where they are from. Partly to cope with this lack, and partly because he was of an arrogant nature, the Star-Child kept claiming that he was better than the other people in the village, seeing as he was “being sprung from a Star” (*FT* 187). That the lack of knowledge about his heritage is what troubles him is made clear in the connective incident (B), when a beggar woman comes to the village and turns out to be the Star-Child’s mother. He is overjoyed by the news of her presence, but denounces her

when he sees that she is a haggard-looking beggar. Shortly after she leaves, the once so good-looking boy becomes “as foul as the toad, and as loathsome as the adder” (*FT* 192). He realises that he has acted cruelly, and that the loss of his looks is due punishment. He truly regrets his actions, and decides upon counteraction (C). He vows to “go and seek her through the whole world” (*FT* 192), and departs into the forest (↑) to begin the search for his mother. The cruelty of his previous actions is made clear to the Star-Child as he in his despair asks various animals to help him find his mother. As he has blinded the mole and cut the wings of the linnet, they could not have helped him even if they wanted to.

For three years – again the magic number – he wanders in “such a world as he had made for himself in the days of his great pride” (*FT* 194). Finally, he comes to the gate of a city into which the city guards will not let him enter. Instead, they sell him as a slave to an “evil-envisaged man” (*FT* 195) who in fact is a mean Libyan magician. In spite of the magician being thoroughly cruel, he is not a villain in Propp’s terminology. In fact, he acts as donor in this tale, testing (D) the Star-Child. On three subsequent days, the Star-Child is sent into a forest to look for pieces of white, yellow, and red gold respectively. The Star-Child reacts positively (E), as he wholeheartedly tries to find the gold. On the first day of his testing, as he is about to give up hope of finding the piece of white gold, the Star-Child hears a cry of pain. He finds and frees a little hare from a hunter’s trap. The hare turns out to fulfil function XIV (F) as it becomes the Star-Child’s magical helper and shows him where to find the gold. The same hare reappears on the second and third days, again leading the Star-Child to the gold. However, every time the Star-Child returns to the city gates, he meets a leper to whom he after some persuasion gives the gold. The Star-Child has learnt that selfishness is a sin, and chooses to face harsh punishment from the magician rather than to leave the leper to his misery. Before the Star-Child leaves for the third and final search for a piece of gold in the forest, the magician says that he will kill the boy if he fails to bring the

piece home with him. Still, The Star-Child gives the gold to the leper. Then, as he enters the city, he is bewildered to find that the people of the city praise him as their lord. The Star-Child loses his way, and instead of returning to the magician, transference takes place (G), and he soon finds himself before a great palace. A guard holds up a shield, and in it the Star-Child sees his own reflection. He has regained his beauty. The people claim him to be their king's son, and we are told that it had been prophesied that on that very day the city's ruler should come, and the Star-Child is asked to be king. He declines the position, saying that he must continue the search for his mother. The Star-Child then discovers her among the people in the crowd and begs her to forgive him. She turns out to be a queen and the leper, in fact the Star-Child's father, is a king. His mother forgives him, and the hero's initial lack is liquidated (K) as he is reunited with his biological family, which on top of all turns out to be of exactly as high rank as he dreamt of while he was living with the woodcutter's family. Thus transfiguration (T) takes place: the poor and hideous slave-boy becomes a handsome prince. Although there is no wedding at the end of this tale, the Star-Child ascends the throne (W), and lives happily and rules justly and kindly – not ever after, but for three years. He then dies, exhausted by the severe suffering and testing he has gone through. "And he who came after him ruled evilly" (*FT* 204). Neither in this tale are we allowed to enjoy a thoroughly happy ending.

"The Star-Child" is a tale with many typical fairy tale traits. Some of the many examples of trebling have been mentioned. In addition there are several instances of personification of animals, most humorously in the beginning of the tale, in the description of how the animals did not know what to make of the extreme cold, and the wolf brusquely dismissing any suggestion that does not blame the Government:

"The earth is going to be married, and this is her bridal dress," whispered the Turtledoves to each other. Their little pink feet were quite frost-bitten,

but they felt that it was their duty to take a romantic view of the situation.
“Nonsense!” growled the Wolf. “I tell you that it is all the fault of the Government, and if you don’t believe me I shall eat you” (*FT* 182).

Another typical fairy tale trait in this tale is the use of certain objects as significant for the plot. For example, the Star-Child is wrapped in a cloak of gold and has a chain of amber around his neck when he is found. These things are what later confirm the passing beggar-woman’s claim that the Star-Child is her son who was taken from her by robbers ten years earlier. There are also several objects presented in connection with the magician: most notably his jasper ring, which functions as a key to open the door to his dwelling; and his turban, from which he takes out a scarf to blindfold the Star-Child with. These objects do not have much influence on the development of the action, but they set the mood for this part of the tale as one of sombreness, sorcery, and enchantment.

A part of every fairy tale’s essence is its moral. “The Star-Child” is perhaps that of Wilde’s tales with the most explicit moral, a moral that is essentially the same as that of the Golden Rule: “And as ye would that men should do to you, do ye also to them likewise” (Luke 6: 31). When the Star-Child is ugly and looking for his mother, he suffers what he has previously caused others to suffer. After he has realised the cruelty of his own past behaviour, he meets the hare who expresses the moral in clear words: “as thou dealt with me, so I deal with thee” (*FT* 198). It is when he has realised the value of this philosophy and acted accordingly, that the Star-Child regains his beauty, this time accompanied by beauty of the heart as well. Yet again Wilde has presented in a fairy tale the idea that beauty can be corrupting. We are told that the Star-Child was an extremely beautiful boy, “[y]et did his beauty work him evil. For he grew proud, and cruel, and selfish” (*FT* 187). This way of describing something as positive and then add a modification so that what seemed positive turns out to be negative, is not an uncommon feature of the fairy tale genre, and Wilde uses it again when he repeats the contrast of beauty versus good

in the description of the forest into which the enslaved Star-Child is sent to look for the pieces of gold:

Now this wood was very fair to look at from without, and seemed full of singing birds and of sweet-scented flowers, and the Star-Child entered it gladly. Yet did its beauty profit him little for wherever he went harsh briars and thorns shot up from the ground and encompassed him, and evil nettles stung him, and the thistle pierced him with her daggers, so that he was in sore distress. (*FT* 197)

This idea that one should look beyond beauty and appreciate inner qualities is, together with a firm belief in the power of love and generosity, strongly present in all the tales. As a foil to this idea, each tale has at least one character that praises the rational and scorns the idealistic. In “The Happy Prince” there is the Mathematical Master who “did not approve of children dreaming” (*FT* 10), at the end of “The Nightingale and the Rose” the sulking student decides that Love is “not half as useful as Logic” (*FT* 31), and in the beginning of “The Selfish Giant” the giant discerns that anyone can understand that “[m]y own garden is my own garden” (*FT* 34), as he expels the children and isolates himself in his castle. In “The Star-Child”, the role as cynical realist is fulfilled by a woodpecker who doesn’t care “an atomic theory for explanations”, but states that “[i]f a thing is so, it is so, and at present it is terribly cold” (*FT* 182).

In the spirit of this woodpecker, and on the basis of Propp’s fairy tale functions, one can state that a fairy tale is a fairy tale, and those of Oscar Wilde’s tales that I have looked at are fairy tales indeed. Not all will agree with me in that they are good fairy tales. Robert Keith Miller, for example, claims that these tales are “[t]oo sophisticated for children and too contrived for adults”, and that they “do not reveal Wilde at his best” (115). Nonetheless, these tales make use of sufficient traditional fairy tale elements to justify their place within the genre, and to form a useful basis on which to discuss the extent of fairy tale-like features in other parts of Oscar Wilde’s fiction.

3 – *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

LORD ILLINGWORTH: . . . *The Book of Life begins with a man and
a woman in a garden.*

MRS. ALLONBY: *It ends with Revelations.*

(*A Woman of No Importance*, CW 443)

I have maintained that a fairy tale is a fairy tale. However, all fairy tales do not necessarily appear as fairy tales at first glance. Unlike the tales in *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* (1888) and *A House of Pomegranates* (1891), *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) breaks with the fairy tale principle of indefinite time and space and is placed in a specific context. Birger Angvik describes the texts of Wilde's two volumes of fairy tales as seeming to take place "east of the sun and west of the moon, where kings and queens and giants, animals, birds, flowers and plants and trees live and grow dramatically in fairy tale time and fairy tale land" (190, my translation). *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, on the other hand, deals, with few exceptions, specifically with Victorian upper-class society in and around London. In addition, the book is of a size more easily thought of as a short novel than as a long fairy tale. However, in spite of its detailed setting and its length, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* consists of several elements that link the book to the fairy tale genre. Perhaps Wilde's only novel is not strictly speaking a novel after all; perhaps it is an extended fairy tale unconsciously hiding behind the pretence of belonging to a genre that readers and critics normally look upon with other eyes than they do fairy tales. This chapter will argue for that assertion, while Chapter Five will look at the consequences of such an idea for the text and the interpretation of it.

The Picture of Dorian Gray is the story of an extremely handsome young man who turns into a Narcissus when he sees a portrait of himself and realises his own good looks. A moment

later, he also becomes a Faustian character, as he utters a wish that the portrait should grow old and ugly while he himself will stay his beautiful, young-looking self. For that, he would give his soul. As the story develops, Dorian indulges in various pleasures and misdeeds. As wished for, the portrait bears the visible signs of leading such a debauched life, while the living Dorian still looks as pure and untarnished as he did when the story began. His two closest friends, the painter Basil Hallward and the dandy Lord Henry Wotton, both influence and follow Dorian's life with great interest. Together, the three of them form the core of the tale; a sinister tale of sins, souls, and superficial society.

The story's protagonist, Dorian Gray, is this tale's hero. He is not necessarily a hero with whom the readers will identify and sympathise, but he is the character that fulfils those of Vladimir Propp's functions that are assigned to the character of the hero. There are several possibilities as to how one chooses to see the other characters in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. One might, for example, see Dorian as a thoroughly villainous hero and Lord Henry as a pragmatic dandy who never shows his real self. A useful approach is to see Basil Hallward as the donor and Lord Henry Wotton as the villain. This is the approach I have chosen.

The initial situation (α) in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is encompassed in the first chapter. Here, Hallward and Wotton are in the painter's studio and in his garden. The three main characters are introduced: Basil Hallward and Lord Henry Wotton through their mutual discourse, and Dorian Gray through Hallward's description. The tension is built up around the lord's – and the reader's – hopes and expectations of meeting the young man that obviously has had such an impact on Hallward's personality as well as his artistic work. The second chapter of the book opens with the two men retreating from the garden and re-entering Hallward's house. Inside, Dorian Gray has arrived, and the plot begins to develop. Basil Hallward did not initially want to introduce the other two to each other, but against his better judgement – because of

Dorian's insistence – he allows Lord Henry to stay with them. While the painter is deeply absorbed in his work on the almost finished portrait of Dorian, the sitter and the observer lay the foundation of a strong but strange friendship, a friendship that is characterised by the elder man's conscious influence on the younger one. An interdiction (γ) is addressed to the hero as Basil, who does not want Lord Henry and Dorian to become too close friends, begs Dorian to stay with him rather than go to the theatre with Lord Henry. Dorian violates (δ) this interdiction and goes with the lord. We are told that "[a]s the door closed behind them, the painter flung himself down on a sofa, and a look of pain came into his face" (*DG* 39). Basil Hallward is afraid of the consequences Wotton's influence on Dorian may have, as well as of being left behind, of losing the devotion of the young man "whose mere personality was so fascinating that, if [he] allowed it to do so, it would absorb [his] whole nature, [his] whole soul, [his] very art itself" (*DG* 13).

Function IV, reconnaissance (ϵ), is fulfilled as Lord Henry visits Lord Fermor, his uncle, saying: "You have known nearly everybody in your time, so you might have known [Dorian's mother]. I am very much interested in Mr. Gray at present. I have only just met him" (42). Lord Fermor delivers (ζ) and tells his nephew what he knows about Dorian's family connections. We are told that his mother was a beautiful woman who married beneath her rank, that her husband died in a duel that may have been arranged by Dorian's grandfather, and that Dorian's mother died shortly afterwards. Lord Fermor did, however, not know that she had left behind a child, Dorian, who grew up in the cold and loveless house of his grandfather. The following function, trickery (η), is defined thus: "the villain attempts to deceive his victim in order to take possession of him or his belongings" (Propp 29). This function is fulfilled only insofar as Lord Henry in a way tries to take possession of Dorian's mind, seeking to manipulate the young man's thoughts and opinions. Complicity (θ) is fulfilled as Dorian willingly submits to Lord Henry's influence.

So far, then, at the end of the third chapter, functions II through VII are fulfilled – *The Picture of Dorian Gray* thoroughly follows Propp's outline for fairy tales.

As mentioned in the previous chapter of this thesis, Propp states that the core of a tale's plot begins with villainy (A) or lack (a). In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, we find both. It may be said that the villain, Lord Henry, causes harm or injury (A) to Dorian when he opens his mind to the values as well as the transience of youth, and thus prepares the ground for Dorian's utterance of the perilous wish. In addition, as a result of this wish, Dorian lacks (a) a moral soul, or is at any rate separated from it. As for the connective incident (B), where Dorian's lack of morality is revealed, this is fulfilled by a relatively large plot within the plot; a sequence where Dorian falls in love with and is to marry a beautiful young actress, Sibyl Vane. She kills herself after Dorian ends their relationship because her previously excellent acting skills deteriorate dramatically after she has had real-life experiences of the emotions she acts out on stage. He declares to her: "I loved you because you were marvellous, because you had realised the dreams of great poets and gave shape and substance to the shadows of art. You have thrown it all away. You are shallow and stupid. My God! How mad I was to love you" (DG 102). After breaking the young actress' heart, our not so sympathetic hero wanders the streets for a while, taking in various sensations before he returns home. This night Dorian discovers for the first time that the portrait has changed. He remembers his wish, realises what has caused the change in the face on the canvas, and decides upon counteraction (C):

The picture, changed or unchanged, would be to him the visible emblem of conscience. He would resist temptation. He would not see Lord Henry anymore – would not, at any rate, listen to those subtle poisonous theories that in Basil Hallward's garden had first stirred within him the passion for impossible things. He would go back to Sibyl Vane, make her amends, marry her, try to love her again. (DG 107)

The problem, though, is that Sibyl Vane has already committed suicide. Lord Henry brings Dorian this information the next day, and it is his cynical reasoning that leads Dorian to admit that “this thing that has happened does not affect me as it should. It seems to me to be simply like a wonderful ending to a wonderful play” (*DG* 117). The attempt at virtuous counteraction is discarded, and Dorian embarks upon a life filled with sensual pleasures and a dread that his secret be discovered.

The first function of the donor (D) takes place when Basil Hallward visits Dorian after he has received the news about Sibyl Vane’s death. The painter’s attempts at finding remorse and regret in Dorian can be seen as the test. However, the hero’s reaction is in this case negative, and nothing is gained by the testing (Fneg), as Dorian denies any such feeling. He declares that:

It is only shallow people who require years to get rid of an emotion. A man who is master of himself can end a sorrow as easily as he can invent a pleasure. I don’t want to be at the mercy of my emotions. I want to use them, to enjoy them, and to dominate them. (*DG* 126)

So the test does not lead to the hero receiving a magical helper. However, it does lead to Dorian’s growing dislike of Basil’s attempts at preaching morality. In a similar visit later in the book, the painter again comes to Dorian with morals in mind. This time, though, Dorian snaps and kills his friend. Now he truly needs a helper. By blackmailing a former friend, Alan Campbell, Dorian gets the assistance he needs. Campbell makes use of his skills with chemicals to make the dead body disappear. After a good five hours, Campbell leaves, and “the thing that had been sitting at the table was gone” (*DG* 200). As if by magic, the most apparent evidence of Dorian’s crime has vanished. There is, however, some evidence that is not removed: “the loathsome red dew that gleamed, wet and glistening, on one of the [portrait’s] hands, as though the canvas had sweated blood” (*DG* 199). By contrast, just after he had killed the painter, Dorian noted “[h]ow horribly white the long hands looked! It was like a dreadful wax image” (*DG* 184). It may be claimed that

– through creating the portrait – Basil Hallward was to some extent guilty of turning Dorian into what he became. Yet, the whiteness of his dead hands indicates that he is in fact more innocent than Dorian likes to think, and that the narcissistic Faust must accept more responsibility himself than he cares to admit.

Seeing as the lack in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is Dorian's lack of a moral soul, it is tempting to assume that the hero's object of search, to which he could be transferred (G), should be this soul. Dorian Gray is, though, so vain that he would rather keep his youthful looks than put an end to "the horrible sympathy that existed between him and the picture" (DG 123). He rhetorically asks: "who, that knew anything about Life, would surrender the chance of remaining always young, however fantastic that chance might be, or with what fateful consequences it might be fraught?" (DG 123). Instead, Dorian indulges in various hobbies. All through Chapter Eleven, he solaces himself with brief encounters with different religions and beliefs, with perfumes, music, jewels, and embroideries. All this, and everything else that "he collected in his lovely house, were to be to him means of forgetfulness, modes by which he could escape, for a season, from the fear that seemed to him at times to be almost too great to be borne" (DG 161). This fear is caused as much from the thought that someone else might discover his secret as from the knowledge of the fact that the picture is mysteriously changing.

We are not presented with a direct combat between the villain and the hero in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. However, there seems to be a subconscious struggle (H) going on between the two throughout the book. Dorian is not aware that Lord Henry in the beginning of their friendship decided to try to influence him as an experiment in human nature. The villain has deliberately weighed his words and has eventually made Dorian into even more of a self-indulgent dandy than he is himself. This experiment did, however, not coincide well with the fact that Dorian's conscience came to exist only in the form of a picture. As a result of Basil Hallward's and Lord

Henry Wotton's more or less deliberate interferences in Dorian Gray's life, the corruption of his innocence is completed. Notwithstanding his agonised mind and his unscrupulous behaviour, Dorian appears an outward success. He is wealthy, beautiful, young, and popular. It may be that Lord Henry feels surpassed by his younger companion, that he sees Dorian as a more triumphant version of himself. This is hinted at when Lord Henry towards the end of the book compares himself with Marsyas, Dorian being Apollo. Lord Henry continues: "I have sorrows, Dorian, of my own that even you know nothing of. The tragedy of old age is not that one is old, but that one is young. I am amazed sometimes at my own sincerity. Ah, Dorian, how happy you are!" (DG 247). Lord Henry does not elaborate what these sorrows of his are, but it is natural to assume that they are connected with his recent divorce. It is, however, interesting to note that Marsyas was one of the satyrs in Greek mythology, and that he challenged the god Apollo to a musical contest, agreeing that the winner could punish the loser however he pleased. Apollo won and flayed Marsyas. It may be that Lord Henry feels that by influencing Dorian to become like him, he has in a sense challenged Dorian, lost and been flayed of his carefree optimism: Dorian being young, beautiful and seemingly successful in every way, and Lord Henry himself turning old, divorced and discontented. If the eloquent villain in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is not completely defeated (I), he is at least deflated.

Function XXI, pursuit (Pr), is fulfilled as Sibyl Vane's brother, James Vane, reappears on the scene. He swore to kill Dorian if he ever hurt his sister, and as far as James Vane is concerned, Dorian alone is responsible for the young actress' tragic end, now eighteen years ago. However, the revenge-seeking brother is accidentally shot and killed by a hunting party at Dorian's country estate, and Dorian is thus rescued (Rs). Dorian's nerves were racked as he had felt himself hunted, but after seeing James Vane's dead body, we are told that "[a]s he rode home, his eyes were full of tears, for he knew he was safe" (DG 239). He is, though, not safe

from the ever-changing picture. When Dorian realises that there is nothing he can do to stop the process, he grabs the knife with which he has previously killed Basil Hallward and stabs the portrait. “There was a cry and a crash. The cry was so horrible in its agony that the frightened servants woke, and crept out of their rooms” (*DG* 255). By slashing the picture that contained his soul and conscience, Dorian Gray kills himself.

The real Dorian Gray now makes an unrecognised arrival (O). When his servants enter the old schoolroom in which the portrait was kept hidden, they see “a dead man, in evening dress, with a knife in his heart. He was withered, wrinkled, and loathsome of visage” (*DG* 256). It is a typical fairy tale notion that an unrecognisable hero can be recognised (Q) because of a brand or a mark, or because of an object connected with him or her. Dorian Gray’s dead body is eventually recognised (Q) when his rings are examined.

Although *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is usually not considered a fairy tale as such, the story follows the chronology of Propp’s fairy tale functions, and fulfils a large amount of them. In addition, the story includes a number of other fairy tale elements, such as the repeated use of trebling, the use of strong colours as symbols and contrasts, the struggle between good and bad, and the presence of the supernatural.

In between the frequent dialogue and witty aphorisms and epigrams, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* makes use of what Donald H. Ericksen calls “ornate stylistic embellishments” (53), a trait that also recurs in the stories in Wilde’s two volumes of fairy tales. This is especially visible in the descriptions of Dorian’s house and its various decorations, and adds to the “fairy tale-feel” of the book. Less ornate, but still significant, is the use of trebling. Most striking, there are three characters that form the basis for the plot: Lord Henry Wotton, Basil Hallward and Dorian Gray. This trio is closely bound together, and without any one of them, the plot would not work properly. Another trio forms the plot within the plot that is the connective incident (B).

Sibyl Vane, her mother, and her brother comprise the little family that is so affected by Dorian's whims, and which in return contributes to building the tension around the development of Dorian's life. Other examples of trebling often occur in connection with the latter trio, such as when Sibyl is daydreaming about her brother's new life when he as a sailor arrives in Australia where "bushrangers were to attack them three times, and be defeated with immense slaughter" (*DG* 78). The continuation of this daydream bears other associations with the fairy tale genre as well, as Sibyl fantasises that James would become:

a nice sheep-farmer, and one evening, as he was riding home, he was to see the beautiful heiress being carried off by a robber on a black horse, and give chase, and rescue her. Of course she would fall in love with him, and he with her, and they would get married, and come home, and live in an immense house in London. (*DG* 78)

However, no such luck strikes James Vane – at least not that we are told of. Underlining the lack of value and importance given to the sailor's life, his reappearance in the story seems to have its most significant function only in the effect it has on Dorian's psyche. After seeing James Vane's face through the window at his country estate, Dorian is encompassed with fear, and we are told that "[i]t was not till the third day that he ventured to go out" (*DG* 230) – again an instance of the magic number three.

In Sibyl's daydream, the robber rode a black horse. Black is typically the colour of a tale's villainous side and is often contrasted with the innocent, positive colour white. As pointed out in Chapter Two of this thesis, the black/white as negative/positive is illustrated in "The Happy Prince" when "[The Swallow] flew into dark lanes, and saw the *white* faces of starving children looking out listlessly at the *black* streets" (*FT* 19, my italics). However, white is also often contrasted with red; the colour of blood and passion. This is the case in the previously mentioned contrast between the portrait's red-stained hands and Basil's white ones. In addition to drawing attention to Dorian's crime and Basil's innocence, there is another aspect to this use of colours.

According to *A Dictionary of Literary Symbols*, Plato claimed that “in picturing the gods white is most appropriate colour” (Ferber 233). Without entirely discarding the possibility that Basil’s hands are white “like a dreadful wax image” (*DG* 184) simply because dead bodies tend to turn white and waxy, I will later come back to the idea that the painter Basil Hallward might be interpreted as a Christ-like figure representing love, charity and morality.

In Basil’s garden in the beginning of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Lord Henry Wotton addresses Dorian: “You, Mr. Gray, you yourself with your rose-red youth and your rose-white boyhood. . .” (*DG* 26). Towards the end, Dorian thinks back, “longing for the unstained purity of his boyhood – his rose-white boyhood, as Lord Henry had once called it” (*DG* 251). It is interesting to note that “[i]f red and white roses are distinguished, the red stands for charity or Christian love, the white for virginity” (Ferber 175). Dorian Gray leaves out his “rose-red youth” – he longs only for the virginity of his boyhood, his innocence, and not for virtuous charity. Again we see that although Dorian is the hero in this story, he is far from all good. From time to time he tries to act in accordance with what he believes is good, but he is never really successful, probably partly because he does not have the right motivation. Usually, his wish to be good is due to egotistical reasons, the most prevalent one being to try to stop the terrifying alteration of the portrait that grows more hideous with each sin Dorian commits. As in some of Wilde’s fairy tales, the border between good and bad is blurred in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. However, either between or within characters, the struggle between good and bad is an important plot in fairy tales of all sorts. “‘Each of us has Heaven and Hell in him, Basil,’ cried Dorian, with a wild gesture of despair” (*DG* 181), as he showed the painter the altered portrait. In addition to the question of good versus bad, we are here faced with the issue of free will; whether it is possible for any human being to consciously choose which of the two one is influenced by. Dorian Gray repeatedly tries to traditionalise his role as hero and act in accordance with what is generally

thought of as good. When he fails, one might wonder if that is because free will as such does not truly exist, or because Dorian subconsciously does not want to give up the Hell in him.

Generally in Oscar Wilde's works, there is no clear-cut distinction between good and bad characters. There is, however, a clear distinction between the rich and the poor. As in most fairy tales, the characters are either devastatingly poor or filthy rich. Edouard Roditi points out that Wilde describes two worlds – the mucky, melancholy city slum, and the upper-class society of successful, young men. Roditi states that “[b]etween these two worlds, no decent or comfortable middle class, no quiet family life, no dormitory sections in Wilde's vision of the big city. From the brilliantly lit society . . . we step straight into a dim slum-land . . . whose denizens are all stock characters from almost ‘gothic’ melodrama. . . ” (81). That the characters are stock characters that show little or no development is also a typical fairy tale feature. It must be added, though, that the upper-class characters in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* are flat characters as well. The epitome of the stereotypical high-society dandy is, of course, Lord Henry Wotton. He makes an attempt at defining what it is to be good, saying that “[t]o be good is to be in harmony with one's self” (DG 92). Not to act in discordance with one's own instincts and principles, but to try to realise one's inner, true self, is a characteristic that is recurrent in several fairy tale heroes. In their first conversation, Lord Henry points out to Dorian that “The aim of life is self-development. To realise one's nature perfectly – that is what each of us is here for” (DG 25). These statements reflect existentialist philosophy, and contrast the untraditional hero Dorian Gray's attempts to hide and forget his true self rather than realising it. He indulges in drugs, art, and other pastimes, trying to keep reality at a distance.

Although Dorian Gray cannot be said to be in complete harmony with himself, he shows other existentialist traits. Most notably, he is forced to consider existential questions concerning fear of death and, even more importantly, the escape from it. Dorian's mortality is

hidden in a work of art and kept in a dusty old schoolroom in his luxurious house. He cannot escape it; the portrait is a visible symbol of his soul and its disconnection from his body. I will return to the question of to what extent Dorian Gray is in fact a fairy tale-like character later. What is undoubtedly fairy tale-like, though, is the supernatural aspect of a piece of art not only symbolising a human being's soul, but actually turning into it and changing noticeably because of it.

Another element connecting Wilde's novel with his fairy tales is the use of the moon to create certain moods and effects. An example is found in the scene where Dorian has brought Basil and Lord Henry to see Sibyl Vane on the stage. The men are disappointed as the girl shows no acting skills whatsoever. "Yet they felt that the true test of any Juliet is the balcony scene of the second act. They waited for that. If she failed there, there was nothing in her. She looked charming as she came out in the moonlight" (*DG* 97). As in "The Happy Prince", the moonlight, however flattering, can be seen as an ill-boding omen. Sibyl does not improve her acting, Dorian does not heed her plea for love and forgiveness, and as in "The Happy Prince", a character with whom we are inclined to sympathise dies. After Dorian leaves the theatre that night, he wanders the streets for a while, taking in various images and sensations on his way. In Covent Garden, a "white-smocked carter offered him some cherries. He thanked him, and wondered why he refused to accept any money for them, and began to eat them listlessly. They had been plucked at midnight, and the coldness of the moon had entered into them" (*DG* 104). What Dorian is unaware of, is that shortly before midnight the coldness of the moon also entered Sibyl Vane as she "swallowed something by mistake, some dreadful thing they use at theatres. . . it had either prussic acid or white lead in it" (*DG* 115). There is, though, hardly any cause to argue with Lord Henry as he tells Dorian: "I have no doubt it was not an accident" (*DG* 115). Sibyl Vane committed suicide because Dorian Gray broke her heart.

Yet an idea from the fairy tales that recur in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is the idea that the soul is encompassed in the heart. The nightingale in “The Nightingale and the Rose” had to pierce her heart to allow her soul, represented by her life-blood, to flood into the tree to give life to the sought-for red rose. After Dorian has stabbed his portrait, his servants enter the room to find that “[l]ying on the floor was a dead man, in evening dress, with a knife in his heart” (*DG* 256). Dorian Gray pierced the symbol of his soul with a knife, and as soul and body were reunited in death, the knife stuck in his heart where his soul had returned to its rightful home.

Joyce Thomas points out that “[p]hysical things given concentrated focus in the fairy tale may constitute the focal point of the entire tale’s action or a part of that action. Usually such things are magical objects of one sort or another” (186). In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the portrait is an obvious magical object of this kind. In addition there are several other objects – not necessarily magical – that are important for the development of the novel’s plot as well as for the symbolic presentation of themes and ideas. One such object is the yellow book that Lord Henry lends Dorian; the book that “seemed to him to contain the story of his own life, written before he had lived it” (*DG* 147). To Dorian, it seemed that “the sins of the world were passing in dumb show before him. Things that he had dimly dreamed of were suddenly made real to him. Things of which he had never dreamed were gradually revealed” (*DG* 145). This book is to Dorian a poisonous book which fascinates him deeply. He reads it over and over, and orders it in several copies in different colours to suit his various moods. Dorian’s attraction to the yellow book underlines an almost Don Quixotic aspect of his character. Not because, like the nightingale in “The Nightingale and the Rose”, he is a naïve romantic, but because he is influenced by literature to the extent that he sees his own life in terms of what he reads. Birger Angvik states that Dorian Gray “suffers from the same ailment as other melodramatic and tragicomic characters in European literature, such as Don Quixote and Emma Bovary” (49, my translation). He continues

to say that Dorian sees fiction as a mimetic reflection of truths in and for the life he is to lead, and that he uses that fiction as a guideline for his own life. It is, of course, understandable that a person who has had the experience of watching his own soul grow repugnant on a large canvas seizes any occasion to escape into a fictional world in which the realities of his own life seem less terrifying.

Yet, he revels in the fact that he is able to keep his youthful, good looks. Like Narcissus, he is captivated by his own face. It was not until he saw himself as represented on the portrait by Basil Hallward that he realised his exceptional beauty, but as soon as he had recognised it, he was enthralled by it. As he discovers that the portrait is to bear the visible signs of his misdeeds, Dorian pities the destruction of the artwork. He remembers that “[o]nce, in boyish mockery of Narcissus, he had kissed, or feigned to kiss, those painted lips that now smiled so cruelly at him. Morning after morning he had sat before the portrait, wondering at its beauty, almost enamoured of it, as it seemed to him at times” (*DG* 123). In connection with this side of Dorian’s character, mirrors are much-used symbolical objects in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. When he notices the first change in the portrait, Dorian takes up “an oval glass framed in ivory Cupids, one of Lord Henry’s many presents to him. . . .” (*DG* 105). It is hardly insignificant that the object reflecting Dorian’s image is decorated with figures of the Roman god of love. “I wish I could love” (*DG* 234), Dorian exclaims at one point in the novel. Nevertheless, as he subsequently points out, “I seem to have lost the passion, and forgotten the desire. I am too much concentrated on myself” (*DG* 234). As a fictional person, Dorian Gray’s flaw is that he cannot help being dominated by self-obsession, no matter the price he has to pay. The magical portrait is in its way a mirror too, reflecting the real Dorian Gray. Dorian Gray the human being actually turns out to be more of an artefact than his picture is. In fact, it is tempting to apply to Dorian himself the quote from the fourth act of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* that he thinks of in connection with the portrait: “Like the

painting of a sorrow, a face without a heart” (*DG* 245). This is exactly what our hero has become: a pretty face and no heart.

What Dorian Gray does have, is a name. Cooper points out that to know a character’s name is often linked with obtaining a certain power over that character. He states that “[t]he belief in the Power of the Name runs right through religion, myth, ritual, saga and legend down to the fairy tale, in which it appears frequently and plays an important part” (66). At the very beginning of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Lord Henry addresses Basil calling Dorian the painter’s “mysterious young friend, whose name you have never told me” (*DG* 9). On the next page, Basil suffers a slip of the tongue and reveals that the young man in the portrait is called Dorian Gray. The painter then explains why he had not intended to tell: “When I like people immensely I never tell their names to anyone. It is like surrendering a part of them” (*DG* 10). In the course of the next few pages, the roles shift, and Dorian and Lord Henry become great friends while Basil is left behind with his art and his morals. The scene where Lord Henry learns Dorian’s name marks the beginning of his corrupting influence over the younger man, this tale’s impressionable hero.

Oscar Wilde does not have a reputation for creating particularly rounded characters, nor for varying the types he created. The persons appearing in any one of his literary works are likely to be recognised in several of the other ones, and they often seem to be more or less abstract representations of groups of ideas and ideals rather than real-life persons. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is by no means an exception from this tendency. In his *Aspects of the Novel*, E. M. Forster introduced the idea that literary characters can be “round” or “flat” (93). He states that flat characters are “sometimes called types, and sometimes caricatures. In their purest form, they are constructed round a single idea or quality” (93). The characters presented in *The Picture of*

Dorian Gray are to a large extent flat, fulfilling yet another typical trait of the fairy tale genre. In *A Contemporary Guide to Literary Terms*, a flat character is defined as:

a kind of caricature or stereotypical figure, one who expresses a single quality or idea. Flat characters are commonplace in allegories, frequently representing notions of good and evil. In any event, flat characters are one-dimensional, meaning that they do not develop or change in the course of a narrative or a dramatic work. (Barton 30)

Although the characters in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* are not always clearly good or evil, they are all portrayed as exaggerated, non-developing stereotypes, be that highly emotional and theatrical, almost intangible figures, such as the Vanes, or decadent hedonists like Lord Henry Wotton.

Dorian Gray, the hero, is described as:

wonderfully handsome, with his finely-curved scarlet lips, his frank blue eyes, his crisp gold hair. There was something in his face that made one trust him at once. All the candour of youth was there, as well as all youth's passionate purity. One felt that he had kept himself unspotted from the world. (*DG* 23)

This description fits well with how Cooper describes the looks of the typical fairy tale hero: "The hero has essentially solar qualities – he is young, handsome, golden-haired. . . ." (81). The question is, then, if Dorian Gray can be said to be a fairy tale hero in other respects than his physical appearance. The fact that Dorian cannot be seen as strictly "good" in the traditional fairy tale sense of the word works against this assertion. He does not lead a moral life of generosity and helpfulness. Neither does he stand out as more worthy of success than other characters in the book. However, Dorian Gray does not appear as villainous as he in fact is. Somehow he is portrayed more sympathetically than he can be said to deserve. Richard Ellmann points out that readers are "regretful, rather than horrified, at his waste of [his beauty], so that he has something of the glamour of a Faust rather than the foulness of a murderer and drug addict" (*Four*

Dubliners 24). All things considered, Dorian Gray is portrayed as something of a hero, though one with a torn conscience rather than strict moral principles. In another work, Ellmann calls Dorian “a stereotype of desirable youth” (*Two Approaches* 8). At least within the sphere of the book, Dorian seems to appear a successful hero that others would like to resemble:

Indeed, there were many, especially among the very young men, who saw, or fancied that they saw, in Dorian Gray the true realisation of a type of which they had often dreamed in Eton or Oxford days, a type that was to combine something of the real culture of the scholar with all the grace and distinction and perfect manner of a citizen of the world. (*DG* 149)

In fact, Dorian’s fairy tale-like physical appearance becomes so much a part of his personality that it would be wrong to separate the two. His fascination and horror at the changing picture is largely because his narcissistic side abhors seeing the effect of ageing on the canvas. Like Wilde’s fairy tales, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* presents the idea that although good looks are often perceived as synonymous with good behaviour, beauty has a tendency to lead to the corruption of mind and morals. Alan Sinfield writes that “the disfigurement of the picture depends on a correlation with loss of youth and beauty” (103). For each crime Dorian commits, his portrait becomes more repulsive.

Also underlining Dorian’s role as hero is his relationship with Lord Henry Wotton. Joyce Thomas states that “[i]n the fairy tale the protagonist is such by virtue of his polar opposite. Without the antagonist to antagonise him, to strew obstacles in his path or actively seek his destruction, the protagonist would be incapable of defining himself as ‘hero’” (15). It is certain that without the influence of Lord Henry, Dorian’s life would have turned out quite differently. “[T]he protagonist is the central character who contends with antipathic forces, the antagonist embodies those forces. . . .” (Thomas 15). Dorian’s greatest struggle takes place within himself, but the ideas that he struggles with are largely those of Lord Henry Wotton. Whereas Basil Hallward tries to bring out the best in Dorian, Lord Henry influences his younger companion

with cynical hedonism. Dorian Gray is a fairy tale hero in that he has to combat with a villain, and in that he eventually overcomes that villain, discards the villainous ideals, and stabs the portrait that made visible his succumbing to that villain.

There are hints in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* that Lord Henry is not really as bad as he may seem. Basil Hallward, for example, says that “I believe that you are really a very good husband, but that you are thoroughly ashamed of your own virtues. You are an extraordinary fellow. You never say a moral thing, and you never do a wrong thing. Your cynicism is simply a pose” (DG 11). Then again, there is no denying that Lord Henry wittingly tries to influence Dorian according to his own beliefs and, it seems, turn him into a sort of ideal, a synthesis of art and intellect, of beauty and wit. It can be said that in Lord Henry, the orphan Dorian Gray has met his wicked stepmother, and that the younger man eats all the bright red apples he is offered as easily as he eats cherries the night Sibyl Vane dies.

It is asserted that Dorian Gray can be seen as a Faustian character. If that is so, then Lord Henry is his Mephistopheles. Ericksen notes that “Lord Henry, like Satan, is a gentleman, but one who emits ‘blue wreaths of smoke that curled up in such fanciful whorls from his heavy opium-tainted cigarette’” (100). The description of the rising smoke underlines the association that Lord Henry is the satanic villain bringing with him a piece of burning Hell. In addition – to continue the trail of thought connected with the colours of characters’ hands – Lord Henry is described as “slowly pulling off his yellow gloves” (DG 113) when he sits down with Dorian to talk about Sibyl’s death. As is usual with Lord Henry, we are not told of his true colours, only of what he chooses to show us. In this case, he shows us his yellow gloves. Yellow is the colour of bile and is not only associated with cowardice, but also with insincerity and deception. This image draws attention to Lord Henry as a character that is not to be trusted, a tempter with unknown intentions. In addition, the poisonous book that Lord Henry introduces Dorian to is referred to as

being yellow. This may, however, only be an indication that the novel might have been French, seeing as French novels at the time often came in yellow covers.

Basil Hallward, on the other hand, is clearer in what he wants. As he tells Dorian: “I want you to lead such a life as will make the world respect you. I want you to have a clean name and a fair record. I want you to get rid of the dreadful people you associate with. . . . You have a wonderful influence. Let it be for good, not for evil” (*DG* 174). I mentioned in Chapter Two that Wilde’s fairy tales tend to include a figure of Christ representing love, generosity, and morality. In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, this part is filled by Basil Hallward. He repeatedly begs Lord Henry, the villain, not to influence Dorian, and when the harm is done, he tries to talk Dorian into acting more in accordance with decency and morality.

However, it is not only morals that hint towards Basil being a representation of Christ. Ericksen points out: “The Garden of Eden myth with its temptation, fall, and redemption is strongly suggested. Wilde’s story begins, it will be recalled, almost too obviously in a garden. . . .” (100). It is in this garden, Basil’s garden, that Lord Henry’s fatal influence over Dorian begins. Aspects of Christianity are strongly present as the young Lord’s serpent tongue sneaks words of temptation and moral corruption into Dorian’s as yet naïve mind. Evil triumphs, and in spite of Basil’s attempts at promoting morality, Dorian is won over by Mephisto. The friendship between the painter and his model eventually weakens, but Basil does not give up. Yet again does he appear at Dorian’s house to talk morals. He professes his doubts as to how well he in fact knows Dorian, saying “[b]efore I could answer that I should have to see your soul. . . . But only God can do that” (*DG* 175). A few moments later, Basil becomes the only character in addition to Dorian himself to see Dorian Gray’s soul on the canvas. Shortly after that again, Dorian “rushed at him, and dug the knife into the great vein that is behind the ear, crushing the man’s head down on the table, and stabbing again and again” (*DG* 182). It is tempting to quote Nietzsche: “God is dead”.

Again, there is an aspect of existentialism in the book – God, or religion at large for that matter, has lost his power over the individual. What matters is each character’s ability to keep his own integrity, to act in accordance with his own principles. Dorian Gray does not excel in this – he is too much under Lord Henry’s spell. Previously in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, our hero stated that “Basil could have saved him” (DG 139). However, he chooses not to be saved; Dorian’s vanity leads him to accept Lord Henry’s corrupting counsel.

What is undoubtedly fairy tale-like in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is how easily the readers are persuaded to believe the unbelievable. In the same matter-of-fact way in which Wilde describes that the giant in “The Selfish Giant” “had been to visit his friend the Cornish ogre” (FT 33), we are told that a painted portrait can relieve a person of the process of ageing. Ogres and magic are taken for granted and do not pose a threat to the stories at large. As Dorian himself puts it: “If the picture was to alter, it was to alter. That was all. Why inquire too closely into it?” (DG 123). Like the hero of the book, the readers of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* are asked to accept this metaphysical element without further ado, and for the most part this is unproblematic. Just as it is seen as a matter of course that the death of a bird can give life to a rose, or that a statue can have an emotional life, it is accepted that Dorian can remain young and beautiful as long as the portrait exists. Also similarly to fairy tales, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* “is in a way the story of a sphere in which investigators and police do not enter, a sphere where crime and outlawry can go on unpunished” (Angvik 294-295, my translation). Dorian feels hunted by his own conscience and by James Vane, but not by law enforcement officers. In the same way, most fairy tale heroes can safely kill or mutilate anyone they do not believe is “good” without facing any consequences. It is silently understood that they will get away with it. In this respect Dorian Gray is a fairy tale hero, although he is not always convinced of his own immunity during the course of action.

Norman Page is quoted to have said that many critics have read *The Picture of Dorian Gray* too literally. “Page would rather read the novel as a fable or as a fairy tale, because these are non-realistic genres in which traits such as lack of beauty or physical deformity indicate moral depravity in the characters” (Angvik 282, my translation). I agree with this assertion; my analysis of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* confirms that the work can be read as a long fairy tale as well as a short novel. The question is, then, if this assertion is applicable also to other parts of Wilde’s literature. The following chapter will discuss whether two of his plays, *Salomé* and *An Ideal Husband*, can be linked to the fairy tale genre.

4 – The Plays

*SALOMÉ: There was nothing in the world so white as thy body.
There was nothing in the world so black as thy hair.
In the whole world there was nothing so red as thy mouth.*

(Salomé, CW 574)

Of Oscar Wilde's works, his plays – notably his society comedies – are often the most recognised. He wrote several very different plays, from the relatively unknown *Vera, or the Nihilists* (1880) to the highly and lastingly successful *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895). In this thesis, I have chosen to focus on two plays, each representing a pole of Wilde's writing: the Biblical tragedy *Salomé* (1893) and the humorous society comedy *An Ideal Husband* (1895).

Like *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the one-act tragedy *Salomé* has at its core a trio consisting of a decadent hedonist; a symbolic figure of morality; and a young and beautiful object of adoration that is governed by its own sensual and sexual desires. These are Herod, the tetrarch; Jokanaan (i.e. John), the Baptist; and Salomé, princess of Judaea, respectively. In addition, there are several other more or less important characters in the play, but as in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, these serve mostly as commentators or background figures, seeming to be almost a part of the scenery rather than *dramatis personae*. The plot and the action are driven forth by the aforementioned trio.

There are in fact strikingly many similarities between the main characters of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and those of *Salomé*. The title characters of both works have their desires awakened by a figure that embodies Christian values: Dorian utters the perilous wish for eternal youth after seeing the Christ-like painter Basil's portrait of him, and Salomé is overwhelmed by

her physical yearning for Christ's prophet Jokanaan when she sees him. Dorian gives his soul to avoid being marred by the visible signs of ageing, and Salomé does in a way give up her integrity when she dances for the lusting tetrarch in order to achieve what she wants – Jokanaan. However, Dorian Gray is a young and wealthy, Victorian lad, and Salomé a Biblical *femme fatale*. This essential difference does, however, not mean that they do not have much in common. In fact, Martha Vicinus has introduced the idea that the two kinds of stereotypes are in fact the same in her essay "The Adolescent Boy: Fin-de-Siècle Femme Fatale?" (83-106), and our two heroes do not contradict her assertion. An additional similarity between the two is that they are both so self-absorbed that neither is too troubled when another character commits suicide because the title character does not return his/her love. Dorian does not take long to see Sibyl's death as "a wonderful ending to a wonderful play" (DG 117), and Salomé completely ignores the fact that Narraboth, the young Syrian, falls dead to the ground in front of her. The two protagonists are only concerned with their own wishes and desires. After she has received Jokanaan's head on a silver charger, Salomé exclaims: "I am athirst for thy beauty; I am hungry for thy body; and neither wine nor fruits can appease my desire" (CW 574). In addition to emphasising Salomé's self-centredness and disregard for the situation of others (the man to whom she declares her desire is after all decapitated), this utterance is a parallel to a previous scene in which a fairy tale-like exchange takes place between Herod and Salomé:

HEROD: Pour me forth wine. (*Wine is brought.*) Salomé, come drink a little wine with me. I have here a wine that is exquisite. Cæsar himself sent it me. Dip into it thy little red lips, that I may drain the cup.
 SALOMÉ: I am not thirsty, Tetrarch. . . .
 HEROD: Bring me ripe fruits (*Fruits are brought.*) Salomé, come and eat fruit with me. I love to see in a fruit the mark of thy little teeth. Bite but a little of this fruit and then I will eat what is left.
 SALOMÉ: I am not hungry, Tetrarch. . . .
 HEROD: Salomé, come and sit next to me. I will give thee the throne of thy mother.
 SALOMÉ: I am not tired, Tetrarch. (CW 562)

This is an instance of the wicked stepfather trying to induce the young and beautiful princess, making use of three similar utterances. However, he is not successful as she answers to all his suggestions that she is in no need of what he has to offer. The exchange is erotically laden, as is underlined when Salomé later uses the same words of hunger and thirst to express her physical desire for Jokanaan. In fact, the entire play is full of erotic undertones. Today, most fairy tales are adapted for children – they are modernised and moderated. However, the original folk tales were often heavy with violence and sexual symbolism, much like *Salomé*.

Per Buvik states that Wilde portrays Salomé as “a victim of patriarchal powers. These are powers working through the decadent ruler Herod and through the god-fearing and rejecting Jokanaan” (160, my translation). This description shows yet another similarity with Dorian Gray, who to a large extent is the victim of patriarchal powers working through the decadent Lord Henry Wotton and through the god-fearing painter Basil Hallward. Hallward does, though, not really reject Dorian, but he distances himself from the immorality that Dorian indulges in, and is eventually killed for that very reason – just like Jokanaan loses his head for rejecting Salomé. Confirming the comparison between Basil Hallward and Jokanaan, Buvik also points out that the latter is chaste and virginal, and that his body is described as being white (155). Additionally – like the white-handed, moral-preaching painter – Jokanaan is responsible for awakening Salomé’s dormant passions. “In a sense, it is therefore his responsibility that the princess turns into a scandalous, yes almost monstrous woman” (Buvik 155, my translation). The magic portrait painted by Basil Hallward is what brought life to Dorian’s monstrous side. Even when basing his work on Biblical persons, Wilde’s play portrays the same types of characters that are present in his other works. Flat, non-developing characters are Oscar Wilde’s trademark as much as they are the trademark of the fairy tale genre.

Also the decadent hedonist Lord Henry Wotton finds his counterpart in *Salomé*. Like Lord Henry, Herod is in possession of great material wealth, and they are both in unsatisfactory, childless marriages. However, whereas Lady Wotton only makes a brief appearance in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Herodias, Herod's wife, is a more consistent part of the scenes in *Salomé*. She is, though, not a main character, as she does not contribute significantly to the development of the plot. She backs up Salomé's decision to ask for Jokanaan's head on a silver charger, but Salomé makes it clear that she makes the request for herself and not for her mother. Herodias does not act, she speaks. She argues with her husband and she utters approval of her daughter's decision. In effect, she resembles the cynical realists in Wilde's fairy tales who do not look beyond what they can see. Various characters' different interpretations of the moon's appearance are recurrent symbols in *Salomé*. When Herod exclaims that he sees the moon as a naked, mad woman seeking for lovers, Herodias answers: "No; the moon is like the moon, that is all" (CW 561). She thus asserts her thorough lack of imagination as well as her lack of importance in a play where the main characters are to a large extent characterised by their attitudes toward symbolical objects.

Joseph Donohue ascribes to Herodias another role: that of adding a touch of humour to the tragedy. He claims that her reply about the moon "is positively comic" (131). There is indeed comedy in *Salomé*, and Herodias' cynical replies add to it. A good example is when a truly entertaining, lively discussion among a number of Jews about the ways of God is topped by Herodias' tired remark: "Make them be silent. They weary me" (CW 563). It might be, though, that these remarks are not only a sign of lack of imagination in Herodias; perhaps there is more to her character than meets the eye? Salomé exclaims that it is her mother Jokanaan speaks about when he asks:

Where is she who, having seen the images of men painted on the walls, the images of the Chaldeans limned in colours gave herself up unto the lust of her eyes, and sent ambassadors into Chaldea? . . . Where is she who gave herself unto the Captains of Assyria, who have baldricks on their loins, and tiaras of divers colours on their heads? Where is she who hath given herself to the young men of Egypt. . . ? (CW 557)

It seems Herodias has led a life of multiple experiences in the time before the setting of the play, and that her tiredness can be said to be similar to what Jeff Nunokawa claims to be the “ennui that pervades *The Picture of Dorian Gray*” (153): that is the ennui described as “the dull hangover that comes after . . . the nocturnal thrills of desire” (Nunokawa 153). However, notwithstanding Herodias’ previous thrills, in Wilde’s play *Salomé*, she is largely a background figure, adding to the non-action elements of the play.

The discussion that so wearies Herodias not only adds a comic element to the play, but in fact also a fairy tale element. Yet again Wilde introduces the question of what is good and what is bad, as well as the notion that the line between the two is blurred. One of the Jews participating in the discussion comments that God’s “ways are very mysterious. It may be that the things which we call evil are good, and that the things which we call good are evil” (CW 563). Another aspect that brings associations to the fairy tale genre is the way the play is distanced in setting from the modern world as we (and the Victorians) know it. Russel Jackson points out that *Salomé* “combined oriental exoticism with perverse passions” (166). This combination is reminiscent of the typical fairy tale setting of “a land far, far away, a long time ago”, but also of Dorian’s pastimes in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*; his obsession with music, jewels, and embroideries from the most far-away countries.

Notwithstanding these many similarities, *Salomé* does not follow the chronology of Propp’s fairy tale functions to the same extent that *The Picture of Dorian Gray* does. In fact, my attempt to apply the functions to the tragedy turned out to be largely futile – *Salomé* does not

really fit into the Russian Formalist's theory. However, it is possible to see the main problem of the play in terms of Propp's function VIIIa, lack (a). Salomé lacks the attention she desperately seeks from Jokanaan, and her actions are determined by a wish to make him appreciate her, to liquidate (K) her lack. Function VIIIa, lack (a), is the most important function in Propp's schema, the function that determines what the tale is essentially about. According to Joseph Donohue, "[h]owever perverse Salome's desire for Jokanaan may be, the immutable strength of that desire itself – so great that it overcomes all the world and life itself – is, fundamentally, what the play is about" (131).

Even though it does not seem fruitful to apply Propp's functions to an analysis of *Salomé*, this is not to say that the play is entirely lacking in fairy tale traits. I have already pointed out a number of these traits, all contributing to a rather vague fairy tale-feel in the play. More tangibly, *Salomé* makes much use of the typical fairy tale colours white, black, and red. Salomé desires Jokanaan's white body, his black hair, and his red mouth. Alan Bird comments that "[w]hen Herod first enters, he slips on the blood of the young Syrian who has killed himself for love of Salome: it is an evil omen, says Herod. And from then onwards the colour becomes of increasing significance as even the moon turns red. On the other hand, Salome's feet are like little white doves. . ." (86), contrasting with the red blood of the dead Syrian. As an additional contrast to Salomé's feet, Charles Rickets proposed for the 1906 London staging of the play "a black floor – upon which Salome's white feet would show" (Kaplan 253). The innocent white, the sinister black, and the passionate and deadly red are prevalent all through the play. Donald H. Ericksen has also noted this fact, and points out that "[a]ltogether there are at least forty images of white, silver or ivory, seventeen references to black or blackness, and thirty-eight references to red, vermilion or scarlet" (127), all this in a one-act play of little more than twenty pages.

Katharine Worth's study of Oscar Wilde's plays was "until very recently", according to Ian Small, "the most comprehensive account of the plays available. . ." (178). She too points out the importance of colour usage in *Salomé*, giving as an example the scene following Jokanaan's decapitation:

Out of the cistern rises the huge black arm of the executioner holding on a silver shield the severed head of Jokanaan. There is blood on the head; we must envisage this, not for purposes of realism, but because the showing of the head is really a surrealist composition in white, red and black. . . (Worth 69)

Worth also draws attention to other fairy tale aspects of the play, most notably the extensive use of trebling. She notes that Herod's attempt to make Salomé ask for something else than Jokanaan's head "echoes the triple pattern of Salomé's ritualistic pleading with Jokanaan" (68) when he suggests that she should rather ask for "first, the largest emerald in the world; second, his white peacocks; third, his collection of jewels" (68). In addition, she points out that:

The final sequence is in triple form. First, she releases all her pent-up rage and frustration, mocking the closed eyes and the tongue, once a "scarlet viper that spat its venom upon me", gloating: "Well, Jokanaan, I still live, but thou, thou art dead, and thy head belongs to me." The savagery effects a kind of catharsis: the poison is out, and she can move on into a stiller, sadder music, through the imagery of the past recreating the Jokanaan who might have loved her. . . . That is her elegy for him. At last in the third phase, she confronts again her own feeling. It is raw, full of pain: "Ah! ah! wherefore didst thou not look at me, Jokanaan? If thou hadst looked at me thou hadst loved me." (69-70)

Worth concludes that "there has been a maturing all the same. [Salomé] has learnt to the full what passion is and she has learnt through her suffering the value of love" (70). The value of love is indeed present in *Salomé*, as in all of Wilde's fiction. As mentioned, Jokanaan is this work's moral-preaching figure of Christ, but in addition, as Worth points out, in this play "Christ is 'really' there, an off-stage character, forgiving sins by the sea of Galilee. . ." (53). This, the most morbid of Wilde's fictional works, is no less true to the idea of the importance of true love and

generosity of heart than his other writings.

In disagreement with Worth, Melissa Knox suggests that there has not really been a maturing, that Salomé is as ignorant of the realities of life and death at the end of the play as she was at the beginning. Towards the end, Salomé exclaims that “the mystery of love is greater than the mystery of death” (CW 574). Knox claims that “[t]he mystery of death is that [Jokanaan] does not regain consciousness, a mystery that all children eventually fathom as they grow up and begin to understand reality. The mystery of love is that Jokanaan is not aroused by her, as she is by him” (26-27). As stated earlier in this chapter, flat, non-developing characters are a trademark of Oscar Wilde’s works. With this in mind, I choose to discard the notion that Salomé develops much, if at all, and conclude that she is a static image of beauty and stubborn self-centredness. Like Dorian Gray, she is not the kind of hero that readers are likely to sympathise too strongly with.

One symbol that is impossible not to touch upon when studying *Salomé* is the moon. The moon is ever-present in the play, foreshadowing events and revealing the characters’ different personalities. In addition, the moon brings to the play a certain non-realistic, mystic mood, like it does in Wilde’s fairy tales and in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. The moon is also a traditional symbol of death. When Salomé has in a way (though not really successfully) liquidated (K) her lack and kissed Jokanaan’s mouth, the stage directions state that “[a] moonbeam falls on Salomé, covering her with light” (CW 575). She is happy to have fulfilled her determination to kiss the object of her desire, though also disappointed in the fact that he is not able to kiss her back. Then this rather grotesque scene is cut short as Herod commands: “Kill that woman”, and “[t]he soldiers rush forward and crush beneath their shields Salomé, daughter of Herodias, Princess of Judaea” (CW 575).

Altogether, *Salomé* is a play that has a strong mystic, fairy tale-like feel to it, and it does contain quite a few fairy tale elements. It does, though, not fit very well with the structure of Vladimir Propp's functions, and must in that respect be said to stand out from the other works I have looked at this far. It is interesting to note that the work that might at first seem most in kind with the fairy tale genre is in fact the one that is farthest removed from it in formal features.

As a contrast, *An Ideal Husband* is a play that does not at all contain the mystic, fairy tale feel of *Salomé*. Still, its plot follows Propp's schema of functions thoroughly. The initial situation (α) in *An Ideal Husband* is a party that takes place in Sir Robert Chiltern's house. Guests arrive and their various characters and appearances are described. We are introduced to this tale's hero, Lord Goring; the sought-for princess, Mabel; the villainess, Mrs. Cheveley; and several other characters that for the most part are not essential for the development of the plot. Sir Robert Chiltern and his wife, Gertrude, appear as central characters in the play, but they are in fact acted upon rather than acting. They are, like Herodias in *Salomé*, present as background figures. The Chilterns are, however, important in that they are an essential part of the situation that leads Lord Goring, "the idlest man in London" (CW 488), to assert himself as the hero of the play. When Sir Robert asks his friend for help, he fulfils the role of the dispatcher. In addition, I choose to see the Chilterns as what Propp would term the hero's family. The three rely upon each other for amusement and for support, and are tied together as closely as any family. At the end of the play, they all in fact become family, as the hero gets his sought-for person and is engaged to Mabel Chiltern, Sir Robert Chiltern's sister.

The opening scene is, as mentioned, a party. People are arriving, and there is no absention (β). There is however, a sort of interdiction (γ), one that the hero addresses to himself, as he asserts that he is "not at all romantic" and that he will "leave romance to [his] seniors" (CW 488). This interdiction is soon, though not surprisingly, to be violated (δ), as Lord Goring

“saunters over to Mabel Chiltern” (CW 489) and begins flirting with her. The next function to be fulfilled is function VI, trickery (η). Mrs. Cheveley puts forth her proposition to Sir Robert that he support a speculative canal scheme in return for a compromising letter revealing his youthful crime: selling a Cabinet secret. An agonised Robert Chiltern decides that the disgrace that would follow if Mrs. Cheveley were to make the letter public would be too great, and he consents to do as she wishes: to speak in favour of a scheme he has previously described as “a commonplace Stock Exchange swindle” (CW 493). This is not, however, an unwitting compliance (θ) to deception, but, in Propp’s terms, a preliminary misfortune (λ): the victim complies as a result of being in a difficult situation that “is deliberately caused by the villain” (Propp 30). This episode leads to this tale’s lack (a), which is Robert Chiltern’s desire to get hold of the letter that is now in the villainess’ possession.

The connective incident (B) takes place in Act Two, with Lord Goring visiting Sir Robert. Lord Goring states that “it’s a very awkward business, very awkward indeed” (CW 503), making it clear that he has been told of his friend’s difficult situation. Sir Robert tells the story of how he was tempted into selling secret state information, revealing to the readers/audience as well as the hero what happened nearly eighteen years ago. Lord Goring, the hero, does not approve of the lapse in morality in his friend, but still asserts that: “I will help you in whatever way I can” (CW 507). It becomes clear that Lord Goring is a seeker hero; he will do his best to help his friend liquidate the lack from which he suffers. Sir Robert appreciates the assistance, but still gives in to his fears saying:

I feel that public disgrace is in store for me. I feel certain of it. I never knew what terror was before. I know it now. It is as if a hand of ice were laid upon one’s heart. It is as if one’s heart were beating itself to death in some empty hollow. (CW 508)

Lord Goring then decides upon counteraction (C), striking the table and exclaiming: “Robert, you

must fight her. You must fight her” (CW 508). The only problem is that he does not yet have any idea as to how to fight Mrs. Cheveley. Lady Chiltern enters, and as Sir Robert leaves, Lord Goring takes the opportunity to tell Lady Chiltern that he will be there if she needs a friend. He prepares her for the scandal that might be on the verge of unravelling. Any note of seriousness that has made its way into this scene is brushed off as Mabel Chiltern enters “in the most ravishing frock” saying to Lord Goring: “Pray be as trivial as you can (CW 512). Thus the hero can enjoy a flirtatious moment with his sought-for princess before departing (↑) to try to save his closest friend from public disgrace.

In the third act, the play reaches a high-point both concerning humour and tension. Following a typically Wildean scene with the epigrammatic dandy and his butler, the dandy’s house is entered by several guests, none of which are expected, and none of which know about the others’ presence. Lord Goring is forced to handle Lord Caversham, his grumpy father; Sir Robert Chiltern, his despairing friend; and a woman he believes to be Lady Chiltern, but who in fact is the villainess, Mrs. Cheveley. Our hero, Lord Goring, is moving from room to room, attempting to make order out of chaos. This trying situation might be seen as the testing of the hero (D), but there is no apparent donor actually doing the testing, and it can thus be questioned whether the scene in fact can be said to fulfil function XII (D). Nonetheless, this scene of confusion leads to another important function, namely the struggle (H) between the hero and the villain. This is a verbal battle, culminating in the villainess’ presenting the hero with an ultimatum: “on the morning of the day you marry me, I will give you Robert Chiltern’s letter. That is my offer. I will give it to you now, if you promise to marry me” (CW 533). Lord Goring does not want to make any such promise, and the struggle goes on. Then, coincidentally, Mrs. Cheveley says that she went to the Chilterns’ house the day after the party to ask for a diamond brooch she believed she had lost there the day before. Now the tables are turned and Lord Goring

has the upper hand. He found the brooch at the party and recognised it as one that had been stolen from his cousin ten years previously. He knows that the brooch can also be used as a bracelet, and, symbolically, cuffs it on the villainess' wrist. She is defeated as she is unable to remove the proof of her theft, and hands over Robert Chiltern's letter, asserting the hero's victory (I). Lord Goring examines the letter and burns it – the initial lack is liquidated (K).

At the opening of the fourth act of *An Ideal Husband*, Lord Goring returns (↓) to the Chilterns' house. On arriving there, he is faced with pursuit (Pr) as his scolding father again appears on the scene, demanding of his son that he make something useful of his life, preferably get married and take a seat in Parliament. Lord Goring is rescued (Rs) from this situation when Mabel enters the room. She opens a witty conversation with Lord Caversham while ignoring Lord Goring. With one final remark towards his son's indolence: "I am afraid I can't take him with me to Downing Street. It is not the Prime Minister's day for seeing the unemployed" (CW 540), Lord Caversham leaves the hero and his sought-for princess alone. This leads to a proposal, and the two are happily engaged.

However, the tale does not end here. A difficult task (M) is proposed to the hero when Sir Robert refuses to consent to Lord Goring's marrying Mabel because of the fact that he discovered Mrs. Cheveley in Lord Goring's rooms late the night before. Lord Goring has promised Lady Chiltern not to reveal that she is the one he expected to be there, and thus declares that "I have nothing more to say" (CW 550). The difficult task is, though, quickly resolved (N) as Lady Chiltern admits the truth. All is now well: The Chilterns are given a second chance and Sir Robert is granted a seat in the Cabinet. Although we are not actually presented with the wedding scene, the hero and the sought-for person are engaged to be married (W), and there seems to be good chances of them living happily ever after. *An Ideal Husband* represents a kind within Wilde's fiction that does not appear to be very fairy tale-like at first glance. The play does,

however, fit well into Propp's list of functions, and is the only one of the works I have looked at to have the fairy tale's happy ending.

An Ideal Husband does, though perhaps not to the same extent as some of the other works, contain other fairy tale elements as well. It is a play with an easily identifiable villainess who is exposed by a symbolical object when Lord Goring clasps the bracelet on her arm. She becomes frantic as she realises that she is not able to take it off, and she "is now in an agony of physical terror. Her face is distorted. Her mouth awry. A mask has fallen from her. She is, for the moment, dreadful to look at" (CW 536). Typically, as in for example "The Star-Child" and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, there is an apparent link between immorality and evil-spiritedness and the loss of good looks. We know that Mrs. Cheveley is a villainess from early on in the play, but as tangible proof of her untrustworthiness is presented, her role is confirmed and her true self shines through her intricate attractiveness and grace.

Another element that brings associations to the fairy tale genre is the absence of law-enforcement. Lord Goring does threaten Mrs. Cheveley with the police, but they are never actually summoned. Most significantly, as Alan Fischler points out, "Sir Robert Chiltern never actually has to take the consequences of defying his blackmailer, so that the essential moral questions . . . remain unanswered" (348). In spite of his dubious past, Sir Robert Chiltern is now essentially good. He can thus escape all possible consequences of his youthful crime and start a new life with his "stupidly good wife" (Shaw 239). Although the Chilterns came close to an unhappy ending, it is questionable whether they have in fact learnt anything from their experiences. Lady Chiltern's "mechanical idealism" (Shaw 239) has met with reality, but still it is only after Lord Goring has given a persuasive speech that she withdraws her wish that her husband retire from politics. Sir Robert's initial lack is liquidated and the evidence of his youthful crime is disposed of. Consequently, he feels safe to reassume his outwardly high moral

principles, which is exemplified when he refuses his saviour, Lord Goring, to marry Mabel because he believes Lord Goring may be involved with Mrs. Cheveley. Without denigrating brotherly concern for a younger sister's happiness, it seems somewhat out of order that the man who has just been saved from exposure of having sold a Cabinet secret should be the judge of moral stance in others.

For a while, *An Ideal Husband* seems to turn into a melodramatic tragedy. The gloom of the situation as Act One comes to an end is underlined when Sir Robert demands that the servant, who is already putting out the lights, put out the lights (CW 503). As in *Salomé*, it seems that darkness foreshadows tragedy. However, in *An Ideal Husband*, a chandelier is left illuminating a tapestry of the Triumph of Love, indicating that there is still hope. Indeed, as it turns out, love is eventually victorious. Whereas *Salomé* is killed in the dim moonlight, the main characters of *An Ideal Husband* all end up being happy and in love, except of course for the villainess. Her plan has failed: she did not get Sir Robert Chiltern to support the canal scheme; she did not get Lord Goring to marry her; and she did not manage to ruin the Chilterns' marriage. There is no more room for her in the tale, and she disappears into oblivion. Katharine Worth is more sceptical in her interpretation of the significance of the lighted chandelier: "Is this a symbol of hope or of irony? Impossible to say, any more than to know whether Lady Chiltern will prove right in her belief that people are the prisoners of their past and cannot change" (136). As mentioned above, I believe that Lady Chiltern's assertion is true of the characters in *An Ideal Husband*. None of them seem to have developed or changed significantly through the action of the play. Like fairy tale characters, they are cardboard figures of sets of ideals and principles (or lack of such). This is not to say that they are lacking in human credibility, but that the idea that any of them are essentially different in Act Four from Act One seems improbable. Thus, the honesty of the very last line of the play can be questioned. Amidst all the happiness, Lady Chiltern is not entirely convincing in

her forgiveness when she kisses her husband and exclaims that “[f]or both of us a new life is beginning” (CW 551).

At the end of the second act, Robert Chiltern is allowed a rather long speech in which he declares his frustration with the idolising of men by women:

Why can't you women love us, faults and all? Why do you place us on monstrous pedestals? We have all feet of clay,, women as well as men; but when we men love women, we love them knowing their weaknesses, their follies, their imperfections, love them all the more, it may be, for that reason. It is not the perfect, but the imperfect, who have need of love. . . . Let women make no more ideals of men! Let them not put them on altars and bow before them or they may ruin other lives as completely as you – you whom I have so wildly loved – have ruined mine! (CW 521)

This theme is also found in *Salomé* when Salomé says about Jokanaan that “Thy body was a column of ivory set on a silver socket” (CW 574). The Judean princess puts her object of adoration as high as Lady Chiltern does her husband. The latter of the two women cannot accept that her ideal has sinned in his past because she has placed him on a pedestal of morality. This extreme idolising causes grave problems for the Chilterns’ marriage. Thus, to assure that the ending of the play is perceived as a happy one for the hero and his sought-for person, Mabel Chiltern declares that she does not want Lord Goring to be an ideal husband, but that she would like to be a “real wife to him” (CW 551). This marriage-to-be is based on realism rather than idealism, and there seems to be a good chance that the two eloquent and seemingly shallow exponents of *joie de vivre* will live happily ever after. This question of the “relationship between a man and a woman is one of the fundamentals of the fairy tale. Each must prove him or herself in association with the other” (Cooper 79). Prove, in this case, not that one is able to stay on a pedestal, but that one is able to accept and forgive the other’s weaker sides, that one is able to keep an open heart and an open mind and allow for the fact that no one is perfect. Once again, one of Oscar Wilde’s works emphasise the importance of love, generosity, and open-mindedness;

a typical fairy tale theme.

Another fairy tale element that is similar to the other works I have looked at is that of a Christ-like character preaching the importance of love and generosity of heart. Although Lord Goring is farther removed from an image of Christ than for example Jokanaan in *Salomé* or the little boy with stigmata on his hands and feet in “The Selfish Giant”, he still embodies some of the same values. Martha Orten points out that “Goring talks to Sir Robert and Lady Chiltern of love and charity and forgiveness” (20). She continues to assert the significance of love for the play by stating that:

What makes the conflict that arises so intense is the fact that these people actually love each other. Had Sir Robert not loved his wife, this would have been a play about corruption, blackmail and possible scandal. Had Lady Chiltern not loved her husband, *An Ideal Husband* would have depicted the tyranny of a woman over a man. (29-30)

Confirming her role as villainess, Mrs. Cheveley shows a more cynic view of love than the other characters when she tries to buy Lord Goring’s love with Robert Chiltern's letter. Her affections for Lord Goring may be real enough, but no fairy tale marriage can be based on such a transaction.

Lord Goring is one of the most dandyish dandies in Wilde’s authorship. Even in his courting of Mabel Chiltern, he is epigrammatic rather than romantic. Ian Gregor claims that “[i]f Lord Goring is to be in love it will be with a minor figure of the play, and his ‘love’ will simply be there to testify to his status as hero” (117). Mabel Chiltern is in fact a minor figure in terms of participation in the play, but she is nonetheless a worthy recipient of the hero’s attentions. As Worth writes: “despite her frivolity she is on the side of the angels. . . . She is a figure of life” (139). She is also a figure that arouses sympathy and recognition in readers/audiences. Whereas Lady Chiltern is too rigidly moralistic and Mrs. Cheveley too immoral, Mabel Chiltern is a level-

headed young woman who neither breaks moral or legal conventions, nor condemns the ones that do. In this respect she equals the hero, Lord Goring. It is interesting to note that Arthur Ganz writes that “[t]he villain in a Wilde comedy is invariably a dandy, for the dandy is inherently anti-social. Breaking a moral convention is, in itself, a pleasure for the dandy” (488). Lord Goring is definitely a dandy, and he does stretch some Victorian social and moral conventions, as exemplified in the many witty exchanges he has with his more tradition-bound father:

LORD CAVERSHAM: Well, sir! what are you doing here? Wasting your life as usual! You should be in bed, sir. You keep too late hours! I hear of you the other night at Lady Rufford’s dancing till four o’clock in the morning!

LORD GORING: Only a quarter to four, father.

LORD CAVERSHAM: Can’t make out how you stand London Society. The thing has gone to the dogs, a lot of damned nobodies talking about nothing.

LORD GORING: I love talking about nothing, father. It is the only thing I know anything about.

LORD CAVERSHAM: You seem to me to be living entirely for pleasure.

LORD GORING: What else is there to live for, father? Nothing ages like happiness.

LORD CAVERSHAM: You are heartless, sir, very heartless.

LORD GORING: I hope not, father. . . (CW 490)

However, it is questionable if Lord Goring would actually break any convention. He would at any rate not commit an action as grave as that of Sir Robert Chiltern or of Mrs. Cheveley. She is the thieving, blackmailing villainess of *An Ideal Husband*. The fact is, though, that she is as much a dandy as Lord Goring is. Thus Ganz’ statement that the villain is a dandy stands, but it cannot be turned the other way around. Although most villains are dandies in Wilde’s works, all dandies are not villains. As Richard Ellmann points out when comparing *An Ideal Husband* with one of Wilde’s other society comedies: “The cleverest character in *A Woman of No Importance* is Lord Illingworth, a dandy; in *An Ideal Husband* Lord Goring is equally clever, and equally a dandy, but he behaves well while Illingworth behaves villainously. Wit is no criterion of decency” (*Oscar Wilde* 388). Decency, on the other hand, is a fairy tale criterion for being successful, a

fairy tale criterion that is also present in *An Ideal Husband*. The good end up well, and the bad end up somewhere in oblivion. Although Sir Robert Chiltern's success is based on illicit actions, and despite the fact that he does not really seem to regret his past crime, he is generally considered a pillar of society. The agonies he suffers before his difficulties are resolved can be seen as his Purgatory; he pays for his sin in suffering and is purged and ready to begin a so-called new life with his (probably unchanged) wife and a promising political career with a seat in the Cabinet.

Ellmann also emphasises the significance of love and affection in *An Ideal Husband*. He especially draws attention to the trio of Lord Goring, his father, and Mabel (whom Ellmann mistakenly describes as "Chiltern's daughter" [*Oscar Wilde* 388]) as characters displaying tenderness and loving relations. Worth is in agreement with this, and says about the same trio that "[t]hey challenge one another but create effects of harmony, not dissonance". She continues: "Throughout the play the little movements of kindness and humour among these 'trivial' people form a vital counterpoint to the agonies of the 'earnest' ones" (130). Like in the majority of fairy tales, the "simple" and uncomplicated personalities are the ones that we are most likely to sympathise with. Mrs. Cheveley, on the other hand, awakens feelings of disgust and distrust, the Chilterns of annoyance and to some extent pity, whereas the aforementioned trio brings warmth and humour to the play.

Katharine Worth also mentions that "Wilde spoke of *An Ideal Husband* as his 'mystery' play and obviously enjoyed this aspect of it. . ." (138). The mystery lies in all the secrets and dubious pasts, such as Mrs. Cheveley's theft, Robert Chiltern's selling of a Cabinet secret, and Lord Goring's past engagement to Mrs. Cheveley. In addition, there is the element of mysterious confusion in the scene where Lord Goring suddenly is the unwilling host of a number of characters all hiding behind different doors, unaware of each other's presence. In addition to

adding a certain fairy tale-feel to the play, this scene also draws attention to the use of objects – if not magical objects, then at least ones with secret functions or ambiguous meanings. There is Lady Chiltern’s pink letter to Lord Goring saying: “I trust you. I want you. I am coming to you. Gertrude” (CW 527). This plea for help and support from one friend to another is, not surprisingly, misinterpreted by Mrs. Cheveley as a love letter. The pink letter is a parallel to another letter, the one with which Mrs. Cheveley tries to blackmail Sir Robert. When the blackmailing-scheme fails, however, she tries to use Robert Chiltern’s letter to make Lord Goring marry her. When this scheme fails too, she decides to use the letter from Lady Chiltern as a means for getting revenge; the unsuccessful villainess wants others to suffer as well, especially the woman whom she believes is the recipient of the affections of the man the villainess wants for herself.

The first two plans of the villainess fail because of another object: the stolen brooch/bracelet that Lord Goring handcuffs her with. Mrs. Cheveley describes the ornament as a “diamond snake-brooch with a ruby, a rather large ruby” (CW 515). The emphasis on the ruby’s size underlines Mrs. Cheveley’s materialism. Like most fairy tale villains, her main focus is on the achievement of material goods rather than more spiritual values. That the object’s shape is that of a snake is also significant: it symbolises the snakelike character of its current bearer. Mrs. Cheveley is, like the serpent in Paradise, smooth-talking and deceiving, trying to lure less contrived characters than herself into acting according to her wishes and desires. She is not to be trusted and moves around smoothly and gracefully before she suddenly attacks her victim with her poisonous tongue. However, the snake-brooch is also deceitful and in its turn becomes the object that leads to Mrs. Cheveley’s downfall and disappearance from the play. Literally trapped in the evidence of her thieving character, she is thoroughly defeated by the successful hero of *An Ideal Husband*.

The villainess in *An Ideal Husband*, Mrs. Cheveley, is without doubt this play's bad guy. The problem is, though, that the good guys can sometimes be hard to perceive merely as good. This relates, of course, especially to Sir Robert Chiltern, who in fact has committed a serious crime in his past. In addition, it can sometimes be difficult to sympathise with Lady Chiltern's rigid morality and condemnation of those not worthy of her good opinion, or even with Lord Goring's seemingly unserious and almost hedonistic approach to life. Once again, Wilde blurs the lines between the fairy tale stereotypes of good and bad. Like his fairy tales and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *Salomé*, *An Ideal Husband* encourages a moral way of life. However, as Kathrine Nitter points out when considering *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in light of Nietzsche's philosophy, "'goodness' is not so uncomplicated as it may seem. It often involves motives that are essentially egotistical, and can therefore be said to be hypocritical" (26). Dorian Gray is without doubt hypocritical in his few attempts to be good. Lord Goring, on the other hand, seems not to be thinking about himself at all when he decides to help his friends in need. Perhaps this is a part of the reason why Dorian ends up "withered, wrinkled, and loathsome of visage" (*DG* 256), whereas Lord Goring is happily engaged to his sought-for princess. The less conditional your goodness is, the more successful your life turns out. This notion is also exemplified in, among other works, "The Selfish Giant", when the giant decides to again allow the children to play in his garden. This decision is rewarded with a blossoming garden, a more contented life, and eventually a place in Paradise.

The plot in *An Ideal Husband* follows Vladimir Propp's list of fairy tale functions to a large extent, and the core actions are truly those of a fairy tale: The hero is approached by a friend in trouble, saves him from the villain with the help of a coincidentally acquired object and marries his sought-for person. Although this is the one of the works I have looked at with the most realistic setting and plot, *An Ideal Husband* provides a pleasant escape from every-day life,

blending characters' troubles with secret pasts, symbolic objects, romance, and a happy ending – like a fairy tale. Whereas the other works make use of fairy tale aspects to describe gloom, pessimism and tragedy, *An Ideal Husband* makes use of several of the same aspects to portray a more optimistic view of life in a world that embodies the same corrupt and negative features as the other works I have looked at.

5 – Conclusion

*Go, little book,
To him who, on a lute with horns of pearl,
Sang of the white feet of the Golden Girl:
And bid him look
Into thy pages: it may hap that he
May find that golden maidens dance through thee.*

(“With a Copy of ‘A House of Pomegranates’”, CW 803)

The previous four chapters of this thesis have shown that there are a number of fairy tale aspects in Oscar Wilde’s fiction. As exemplified in the poem quoted above, some of these aspects can also be found in other parts of the body of Wilde’s authorship than the ones I have looked at. The poem also brings associations to *Salomé*, with the Golden Girl dancing on white feet. In fact, Wilde’s works tend to reflect each other regardless of what genres they are usually said to belong to, and there are many similarities to be found among them. As pointed out in the introduction to this thesis, the same themes, ideas, linguistic style, and even names and verbatim phrases recur in several of Wilde’s works. In addition, I have made a point of showing that Wilde’s characters are mostly stereotypes that appear with slight variations in different works. In my analysis based on the notion that fairy tale traits appear in all the works I have chosen to study, I found that even the works that on the surface seem to be very different from each other do in fact have quite a lot in common. For example the rather disheartening fairy tale about the Nightingale’s search for a red rose conveys similar themes as the light comedy *An Ideal Husband*. However, *Salomé* stands out from the rest in that it does not fit with Propp’s chronological list of fairy tale functions. Consequently, the Biblical tragedy is not included in the table given on the following page, in which I present which functions appear in the various works I have studied.

Function	“The Happy Prince”	“The Nightingale and the Rose”	“The Selfish Giant”	“The Star- Child”	<i>The Picture of Dorian Gray</i>	<i>An Ideal Husband</i>
β – I	X		X	X		
γ – II	X		X	X	X	X
δ – III	X		X	X	X	X
ε – IV					X	
ζ – V					X	
η – VI					X	X
θ – VII					X	
λ						X
A – VIII	X				X	
a – VIIIa		X	X	X	X	X
B – IX		X	X	X	X	X
C – X		X	X	X	X	X
\uparrow – XI	X	X	X	X		X
D – XII	X	X	X	X	X	X
E – XIII	X	X	X	X		
F – XIV Fneg.		X		X	X	
G – XV		X		X		
H – XVI		X			X	X
J – XVII						
I – XVIII					X	X
K – XIX			X	X		X
\downarrow – XX						X
Pr – XXI					X	X
Rs – XXII					X	X
O – XXIII					X	
L – XXIV						
M – XXV						X
N – XXVI						X
Q – XXVII					X	
Ex – XXVIII						
T – XXIX	X		X	X		
U – XXX	X					
W – XXXI				X		X
Total Number of Functions	9	9	11	14	17	18

In the above table, I have noted all the functions I have found to be fulfilled, including the few that I describe as somewhat deviant from their definitions in the strictest sense, such as the absentation (β) and the interdiction (γ) in “The Selfish Giant”, which appear as inverted functions. The various functions are presented with their designated symbol and number. For their definitions and descriptions, I refer to the list given on page 13 of this thesis. Seeing as the subject for this thesis is a selection of Oscar Wilde’s fictional works and not fairy tales as such, I have dealt with Vladimir Propp’s study in a somewhat simplified manner, focusing on his list of functions, and not on the complicating factors he takes up for discussion in his *Morphology of the Folktale*. A factor that is not complicating, but essential, is the fact that Propp sees function VIII – villainy (A) or lack (a) – as the core function of any fairy tale:

This function is exceptionally important, since by means of it the actual movement of the tale is created. Absentation, the violation of an interdiction, delivery, the success of a deceit, all prepare the way for this function, create its possibility of occurrence, or simply facilitate its happening. (30-31)

It is, then, noteworthy that in addition to function XII, the testing of the hero (D), function VIII is the only one to be fulfilled in all the works. Seeing as I in fact question whether the testing of the hero in *An Ideal Husband* can fully be seen as function XII, function VIII stands alone as the most thoroughly fulfilled fairy tale function. This fact is in itself a confirmation that Wilde’s works can successfully be studied in light of the fairy tale genre.

As always, however, there is an exception. It is interesting that the play *Salomé*, which at first glance can seem to embody a lot of traits typical of the fairy tale genre, is in fact the work that turned out to be the least compatible with Propp’s list of fairy tale functions. Nevertheless, as stated in the discussion of that play, *Salomé* does embody several fairy tale traits, only not the formal structure suggested by the Russian Formalist. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is another work

that is easily associated with the fairy tale genre at first sight. Indeed, this novel fulfils a large amount of functions – almost twice as many as the fairy tales “The Happy Prince” and “The Nightingale and the Rose” – and it also embodies a somewhat mysterious and fairy tale-like atmosphere. However, my analysis of Wilde’s works in light of Propp’s theory somewhat surprisingly shows that *An Ideal Husband*, which is the most realistic and the least apparent fairy tale-like work included in my study, is in fact the work that fulfils the largest number of fairy tale functions. Does this mean that *The Picture of Dorian Gray* should be labelled a long fairy tale rather than a short novel? Or that Wilde’s fairy tales should no longer be called fairy tales? The so-called fairy tales do contain a relatively small number of functions. However, like *Salomé*, they have a definite fairy tale-feel to them. In my opinion it would be taking it too far to claim that Wilde’s fairy tales cannot be called thus. As I conclude at the end of Chapter Two: “Nonetheless, these tales make use of sufficient traditional fairy tale elements to justify their place within the genre, and to form a useful basis on which to discuss the extent of fairy tale-like features in other parts of Oscar Wilde’s fiction” (35).

A work’s belonging to a genre is not as straightforward as it may seem, and I will not attempt to apply one distinct genre classification to any of Wilde’s works. I simply put forth the idea that disregarding traditional genre limitations can open for different analyses of well-known works. The fairy tale analysis of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, for example, makes the characters appear differently than an analysis of the work as, say, a gothic novel. A gothic novel might focus on trying to find mysterious pasts and secret passages in the three main characters’ personalities, whereas I have focused on symbols and actions that confirm their fulfilment of the fairy tale-like roles assigned to them. In either case the title character, Dorian Gray, will take the part as protagonist. However, the interpretation of his two friends – Basil Hallward and Lord Henry Wotton – might turn out quite differently in the two kinds of analyses. In my analysis, Lord

Henry is given the role as villain, which is a rather significant role, as it is essential for the development of the hero's life. Basil, on the other hand, is important in that he created the infamous portrait, but other than that, he is reduced to a symbolic figure preaching morality. A reading of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* as a gothic novel might reverse the significance of these two characters. Lord Henry can be portrayed as a rather boring, affected man, one who tries to conceal his commonplace self with eloquence. Basil Hallward, on the contrary, would probably be given a larger role in such a reading of the book. He is a man of secrets. From time to time he inexplicably disappears; he likes to keep things to himself; and he gives the overall impression of being a character that hides more than he reveals. These are all aspects likely to be given attention when reading *The Picture of Dorian Gray* as a gothic novel.

However, fairy tales in general tend to have traits in common with gothic literature, especially concerning the general atmosphere and “feel” of the works. Conversely, the fairy tale genre is essentially removed from that of biography. In fact, fairy tales are known to be so far apart from reality that the term has become synonymous with something unlikely or totally fictitious. Thus, the fact that I have chosen to look for fairy tale similarities in Oscar Wilde's works rather than similarities with other genres (which may well be found) fits well with my wish to demonstrate that Wilde's works are literary works in their own right, and not only valuable as portrayals of his life and the time he lived in. There is a certain ambiguity to Wilde's fictional works: on the one hand, they contain a multitude of references to the author's life, as well as critical comments on the time and society he belonged to. On the other, they are literature worth reading for its own sake. Umberto Eco states that “[w]e have to respect the text, not the author as person so-and-so” (66). This is what I have done in this thesis; respected the texts regardless of their author. However, Eco continues: “Nevertheless, it can look rather crude to eliminate the poor author as something irrelevant for the story of interpretation. There are, in the process of

communication, cases in which an inference about the intention of the speaker is absolutely important. . .” (66). I will not argue against the assertion that Oscar Wilde’s intentions are absolutely important for his written works. Instead, I will again point out that Wilde’s fiction can be approached in a variety of manners, most of which are interesting and useful in their different ways. Without denigrating other approaches, I conclude that my notion of seeing Wilde’s works as literature in their own right and as mirroring aspects of the fairy tale genre is one that provides a useful insight into a selection of works that has traditionally been considered mostly for what they reveal about their author and the society surrounding him. The author is Oscar Wilde, a man whose personality was as complex as the art he produced. In my discussion of the various works, I have noted the recurrence of a symbolic figure advocating morality, whereas in the preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Wilde stated that “[t]here is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book” (DG 5). In “The Truth of Masks”, he wrote: “Not that I agree with everything that I have said in this essay. . . . For in art there is no such thing as a universal truth. A Truth in art is that whose contradictory is also true” (CW 1078). In other words, Wilde’s works are not easily pinned down in any way. The most apt conclusion is perhaps Oscar Wilde’s own statement in “The Decay of Lying”: “Art is not simple truth but complex beauty” (CW 978).

Abbreviations

CW – *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*

FT – *Complete Fairy Tales of Oscar Wilde*

DG – *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

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